

天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
Alderamin on the Sky
VIII
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
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VIII
電撃文庫

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Alderamin on the Sky VIII

contents



UNO BOKUTO
PRESENTS

ILLUSTLATION: RYUTETSU
CHARACTER DESIGN : SOU SANBA
Designed by AFTERGLOW

Prologue

The sound of footsteps on the stone pavement and the ragged breathing of several men quickly passed them.

The girl hid in the dark with bated breath. After who knows how many waves of sound pass them by, she took her little brother's hand and ran.

【Sis, it hurts...】

The girl put her index finger to her lips and said to her little brother who was tearing up from the pain of his wrist.

【... Bear with it, Huelly. Until we get away from those people.】

She warned softly, then scampered under the roof of a residential house when she sensed a presence behind her. Shortly after, 4 men armed with Wind Guns appeared from the corner one after another.

【...Ugh...】

Clang clang! Doors were being knocked. These men seemed to be searching the residential units in the vicinity. The siblings hiding under the roof watched as they tried to hide quietly.

——If they find us, we will get taken away too.

A chill ran down the girl's spine at that thought, making her feel very uneasy. A groan welled up to her throat from the pain of her constricting chest.

【——Ughh......!】

She desperately suppressed her urge to moan as she waited for the presence to pass by, mustering her faltering heart through sheer willpower alone. Wiping away her tears with the back of her hand, she gritted her teeth and emerged from her hiding spot.

The girl had a vague idea that this was the doing of the 【Kingdom Revival Faction】.

The Kioka Republic she was residing in was made up of several countries and races, a relatively young Republic. They might all be citizens of the Republic, but they are just a collection of different groups with a myriad of history. Garuma Kingdom, Nitagua Duchy, Mamulan Tribes Federation, Bayushie, Laos and Yaponiku Separatist Nation were known as the 6 nations of the east. About 200 years ago, their ancestors lived separately in these countries that have now ceased to exist.

This was a common history for all citizens, but there was still a small fraction of people who were too caught up in the past. The Garuma's Kingdom Revival Faction was one example, and an exceptionally terrible one at that. Centuries after the founding of Kioka, they still could not forget the glory of the old days and wanted to restore the Kingdom. They retained a level of influence in the Parliament and would use violence from time to time to achieve their goal.

【Father... Mother...】

The little brother sobbed, and the girl almost cried after hearing that. Their parents had been taken away by the Kingdom Revival Faction.

She could still see that scene when she closed her eyes. When the siblings who went out to play got hungry and went home, she saw her parents arguing with a few strangers at the entrance. Sensing danger, she took her brother's hand and hid to observe—— before long, their parents were taken away at gunpoint.

Their parents were captured.

The moment the girl understood the situation, she started thinking about what course of action she should take and put them into action.

【They are gone. Let's go, Huelly!】

She led her brother out of their hiding spot and started running again. She wiped away the dirt, rain, and tears on her cheeks with the back of her hand to suppress her fear.

The girl desperately thought with her still developing brain—— first, she must get her little brother Huelly to safety. Her young brother was the weakest member of the family and would need someone older to take care of him. So, where should they flee to?

When in trouble, ask the neighbours for help. That was what her mother instructed her, but the girl felt it would not work this time. Be it the Aunt Hasa from the vegetable stall, the cobbler Uncle Meddi, or the master carpenter Mabasai who was many times her size, they were all helpless against threatening people with guns.

She should seek help from people equipped with the same weapon. The girl concluded and decided to head to the police post in the neighbourhood. She passed by there when she went shopping with her mother and had a vague idea how to go there. It will take less than 40 minutes by the normal route. However, …

【Hah! Hah... Ah...!】

The problem is the Revival Factionists running all over the place. After moving for more than an hour, the siblings still have not reached the neighbouring zone because of the patrols. And her last stop was unexpected.

【Uwah! This place too...! Just how many of them are there?】

The more stops she had to make, the more the girl realized she was caught up in a major incident. She could not imagine how big this thing was. For the girl who just passed her tenth birthday, the few hundred metres centred around her home was her whole world.

But thanks to the children’s petite size, the siblings kept moving without being detected. A strange scene suddenly appeared before them and the girl frowned as she ducked in the shade of a cart at the road shoulder.

【They are playing ‘you shall not pass’...】

The girl commented on what she saw. Like what she said, a large group of soldiers were blocking the road, and a barricade made from wood was made on the other side.

【...】

An unexpected obstacle appeared, but the girl didn’t despair. Since they put so much effort into stopping people from passing through, things would be different once she passed through—— she was optimistic. Leaving the gravity of the situation aside, this was a talent.

【Sis, now what...?】

The brother tugged on the sleeve of his sister who was in deep thought. The girl looked around quietly.

The bothersome barricade was just erected and had several obvious gaps. It would be easy for two small children to squeeze through.

However, they were too far away from the gaps, and there were too many people watching the middle. It was more than 30 m away, and they couldn’t run that far without getting detected. Even if they tried to run for it, they would probably be caught by the faster pace of an adult.

After agonizing over it for a long time, the girl glared at the cart before her determinedly. A yoke was placed on the horse, but the wheels were carelessly left unlocked, showing how disorderly the revival factionists were— the girl didn’t think too much about that and came up with a simple idea after seeing the cart as a means of transportation.

「Get on.」

She just needed to untie the rope on the cart, pull the tail of the horse, and the horse should run. The girl recalled her vague memories and groped around the seat.

「Hurry up! The republic army is coming!」

A middle-aged man from the Kingdom Revival Faction supervising the construction of the barricade shouted. His tone in giving orders and concise instructions made it clear he was a veteran commander. That was a given, since he was a retired soldier of the Kioka Army wearing the insignia of a Sergeant.

「The work is progressing smoothly, commander.」

「Hmm, carry on. Whether we can block this road will have a big effect for the future.」

The man replied to his subordinate who reported to him and crossed his arms with a stern expression.

「We have to carry out the plan no matter what. Those Senators are weak and unsightly… reviving our nation will just be a pipe dream if we depend on them.」

His subordinate nodded silently. The man then raised his voice and continued:

「It has come to this, so we shall start things rolling. We will turn this corner of Capital Norandot into a residential zone exclusive for Garuma citizens. We will deport people of other races and gather our people and unite our race. Garuma people should live as Garuma citizens— The basic education about one common identity for all races is blasphemy!」

His words were filled with rage and passion as he spoke at a quicker pace.

「Can you believe this, Kuyadi? My son is studying in the same class as a Nitagua idiot and a Mamulan savage. I protest about this, and the school accused me of discrimination instead… Incorrigible!」

Thump! The man stomped his boot onto the ground violently, then clicked his tongue with a slightly softer voice.

「As a compromise, I can accept all the races coexisting together… But this should be done with we, the Garuma people in the forefront. Isn’t that obvious? Before the founding of Kioka, we are the ones who held the most power. Be it Nitagua, Mamulan, Yaponiku, Bayoshie or Laos— they were all beneath us. How dare they think of themselves as our equal!」

His subordinate nodded in agreement. The man patted his shoulder and announced firmly.

「We will right that misunderstanding. You got that Kuyadi!?」

「Yes, Commander!」

At that moment when the two of them reaffirmed each other’s goal to revive their fallen nation —

「—Hey, what’s going on? That cart there, halt!」

The confused shouts of their comrades reached their ears, and they turned back in surprise. They saw a horse dragging a cart that was parked at the roadside running towards them.

「Halt! I say halt—」 「Hey, it’s coming this way!」 「Woooaaahh?」

The rampaging horse jogged in place right before the barricade, and the cart crashed into the half-erected barricade because of the momentum— And the most surprising thing was, a young pair of siblings alighted quickly from the cart.

「Phew...! Run, Huelly!」

With her eyes locked on the other end of the barricade, the girl took her brother’s hand and ran with no regards for her bleeding forehead. The sight of them made the revival factionist shout with pale faces:

「There’re kids! The kids are escaping!」 「What? Seize them!」

The group chased after the two children squeezing through the gaps and closed the distance in no time. They were caught off guard,

but they could outrun the children easily— Just when they were scoffing at the children, an unexpected impact shook their bodies.

「Kyaa...?」 「Ughh!」

The men who were just a step away from the siblings fell one after another. Seeing them clutching their shoulders and chests in pain, the commander on site shouted with his eyes wide:

「What? What happened!」

「Gunfire, commander! We are being attacked!」

「Gunfire? Stop kidding around! There's no signs of the enemy —」

Another comrade before them fell to a bullet. This made the commander realize his mistake. He shifted his eyes sweeping the ground above him — and stared with his eyes wide open.

The roofs on either side of the road entered his field of vision. Large groups of Wind Gunners laid prone on the roof in firing positions.

「—They deployed the advance party on the roof? Damn it, a parlour trick...!」

The commander glared at the enemy forces through gritted teeth. His subordinate besides him who notice another danger shouted:

「Enemy units sighted ahead! They are approaching fast— a cavalry company!」

The commander hid behind covers and shifted his gaze from the roof to the other side of the barricade. He could see the cavalry kicking up a storm of dust, which made his heart waver again.

「This is the main event! Don't be afraid of the gunfire from above, everyone, get ready to engage! The barricade will hold! Hold for the right timing and attack!」

The men who received clear instructions propped up their weapons and aimed at the cavalry kicking up dust on the other side

of the barricade — as they waited for the right moment to squeeze their triggers, some of the men noticed something was wrong.

「Hey— that's...」 「Yes... They aren't slowing down.」

They were close enough to make out their uniform, but the enemy showed no signs of slowing down, as if they couldn't see the barricade.

「...Are they going to crash right in?」

The cavalry that wasn't slowing down advanced towards their inevitable demise before the barricade. The Revival Factionists could only imagine the cavalry self-destructing after crashing into the barricade, however — The next moment, they saw at close distance the heavy horses jumping into the air. 「What—!」

Performing way above the standards of normal cavalry, the way they jump clear of the barricade was on the level of a circus performance. The wooden structure that should be protecting the soldiers got rendered useless.

「Hieee—!」 「Uwaahhh!」

Realizing their mistakes, the soldiers' screams turned into a chorus. The barricade they erected was not an effective road block at all — the moment they misjudged that, their resistance was already over.

「Mum*... This method of setting up roadblocks is so last generation. Instead of wasting time building it with wood, using barbed wires would be much faster.」

A prominent white-haired officer started checking the area after the suppression was complete. He was exceptionally young for an officer, with an energetic spring to his actions and authority in every step he took.

「It can't be helped, Jean. The commander is probably a retired soldier, while barbed wires are only used on the grounds recently...

Soldiers who have been away from the frontlines for a while won't have experience with that.」

His black-haired adjutant, Major Miara Gin replied. Her facial features and shape of the knife on her waist made it clear she was from Yaponiku that had ceased to exist.

「A generation gap, huh... If only this gulf can stop the spread of useless ideologues like Kingdom Revivals —」 Jean said with a sigh. After combing through the zone that had been suppressed, the two of them walked towards the two children who were the key for breaking through into enemy grounds.

「—Sorry for frightening you. You escaped from inside, right?」

Jean bent down to the siblings' eye level and asked. The sister looked back with probing eyes, while her brother stuck closely to her back.

「Did you get separated from your mother and father?」

Jean continued asking, and the girl nodded slowly.

「Are you the police?」

「It's a little different, but very similar. But rest assured, we are here to rescue you.」

Jean promised with a smile, and the girl told him calmly.

「Father and Mother got taken away by the people from the Kingdom Revival Faction.」

The girl pushed her little brother towards the stiff faced Miara.

「Please take my little brother somewhere safe, I will pick him up later.」

She said as she looked around her and added as she stared at the soldiers busying around.

「And— Please give me a weapon. A gun like that will be fine.」

「Weapon? ...Why would you need one?」

The girl turned away from Miara who asked her that question and said without any hesitation:

「It's obvious. I'm going to get my parents back.」

The girl concluded firmly with no room for negotiations. The white-haired officer standing beside his dumbstruck adjutant smiled.

「...How wonderful. Alright, I will lend you one.」

「Jean? What are you—」

Ignoring the surprised Miara, Jean looked at the girl with his silver eyes and said in a serious tone:

「Brave lady, may I have your name?」

「... Kasha Masukusu. My brother is Huelly.」

「Thank you, Ms Kasha. Don't worry, I will ensure your brother is sent to a safe place.」

He signalled with his gaze, and a mild-mannered female soldier came over to get the girl's brother. The boy didn't want to leave his sister, but he steeled his resolve and followed the female soldier sullenly.

After seeing them off alongside Kasha, the white-haired general pointed to himself with his thumb and said.

「Let me introduce myself too. I'm Jean, Kioka Army Major General Jean Arkinex.」

The youth renown throughout the republic stated his name with pride and confidence. There seemed to be light illuminating him from behind, which made the girl stared with her eyes wide.

「Remember the name. That's the name of the strongest weapon on loan to you.」



Chapter 1

「... The reports are in. We are right, the former Garuma extremist faction has captured the 6th eastern zone in the Capital Norandot.」 The clerk was the bearer of decisively bad news.
In the centre of the Capital was the Parliament House, and there was a tense atmosphere in its Committee Chambers. Most of the Senators there were sternly interrogating a man in a dark blue suit standing by the window with his back towards them.

「—The situation is getting serious, Prime Minister.」

There was obvious hostility and glee in that voice. This was followed immediately by another voice with a similar tone.

「Just counting the major ones, this is the fifth civil unrest that happened during your term in office… The military campaign against the Empire has been put on a long hiatus because of that. We can't defend you this time.」

「That's right. It's all because of your major reforms with no regards for the opposition. How do you plan to resolve this?」

「When the Imperial army was divided two years ago because of a coup, we could have launched a major invasion if we were prepared, but that plan fizzled away — because there had been too many underlying turmoils in the country.」

「One civil unrest after another disrupted our grand strategy. The Empire did fan the flames from the dark, but that's not good enough of an excuse. Don't you think someone should take responsibility for this?」

Despite the relentless interrogation, the back they were glaring at remained unwavering. There was only the sound of metallic pipes brushing against each other coming irregularly from that man.

「Please give us an acceptable answer! You can't dodge the question by staying silent!」

One of the Senators became agitated because of the lack of reaction and raised his voice to levy accusation against that man. As if that man just realized that his answer was being sought, the sound of metal suddenly stopped.

「— Even if you accuse me of staying silent, I can't fathom your worries.」

The man's answer was so calm that it was infuriating. Staring at the average sized back standing stoically at the deepest part of the room, the Senators hoped to destroy this base camp.

「There's a limit to your stubbornness! Or do you not understand the situation? Extremists from the former Garuma nation had seized a part of the Norandot residential zone with a stranglehold on it! It's obvious that this incident will involve a large number of citizens. No matter what the goal of the extremist might be, they will definitely use the citizens as hostages...!」

「If there are many casualties because of this incident, then support for your hold on power will plummet. The results will be the same if you expose your weakness by giving in to the extremists. You are finished, Prime Minister. Your days looking down at the streets from this window are numbered —」

After hearing a series of optimistic predictions, the man in a dark blue suit shook slowly, and it was obvious that he was laughing.

「Gentlemen, I'm honoured. Instead of the safety of the captured citizens, you are more worried about my future.」

After that sarcastic comment, the man in the dark blue suit added before the Senators lashed out at him: 「Don't worry, your worries are unfounded.」

Overwhelmed by that man’s aura, the Senators were momentarily silenced. The sound of metallic pipes rubbing started again 「I already took the necessary measures and just waiting for the good news.」



「......」

Inside the tent erected in the middle of the sealed road. Time stopped for the brave girl Kasha as she looked at the table before her. More accurately speaking, she was looking at the sliced bread, fruit palate and milk in a copper cup. 「What’s wrong? Eat up. Aren’t you hungry?」

Jean, who was seated opposite the girl, urged her to eat with a smile. He was biting into an apple with a crunch. 「Don’t worry about your brother, he’s having the same thing as you. Fresh fruits and vegetables are provided three meals a day, that’s one good point about fighting inside the city.」

「... Aren’t you going to take care of those guys?」

The girl asked while clutching her spoon, Jean suddenly asked with a serious face.

「Ms Kasha, is your goal taking care of those people from the Kingdom Revival Faction?」

The surprised Kasha was quiet for a moment before she shook her head with a pout.

「...No. Like I said at the beginning, I want to get my father and mother back.」

「Great, then we have the similar goals.」

The white-haired officer smiled in relief and tapped the table with the tip of his finger.

「It's easy to take out the enemy. I just need to send in my men in an all-out attack, and it will be over in an hour — but that will result in an intense battle. And your parents might get hurt from that. Do you understand?」

Hmmmm～ Kasha frowned. After an adequate pause, Jean continued.

「The goal is to rescue the people who got taken away, and fighting is just the means of achieving that. Don't get that wrong, Ms Kasha.」 「... Then Jean, how do you plan to rescue my father and mother?」 Instead of answering this question, the white-haired officer gazed towards the tent's entrance. Soon, adjutant Miara pulled the curtain aside and stuck her head in.

「Jean, the messenger from the infiltration unit just returned.」

「Yah*. Report.」

「Yes— First, the enemy is about a battalion in size, 600 people. Most of them are militia who have not gone through basic training, but a third of them are retired or active soldiers.」

「As I expected. And the citizens rounded up by them?」

「The bulk of them are imprisoned about 300 m to the east — The Cultural Centre in the middle of the 6th eastern zone. They weren't being treated too badly now. They bandaged those injured in the first round of attacks and provided water for everyone. Aside from a few cases, most of the citizens are just mentally distraught.」

「What about the few cases?」

Jean didn't miss those words and asked about them. Miara bit her lips hard and answered:

「... Some of the militia used violence on citizens with non-Garuma heritage. For now, it's just kicking their backs and cursing them out… But if this drags on, their violence might intensify.」

「— Stupid.」

After giving an agitated comment, Jean sighed deeply.

「I understand the scale of the enemy forces, the situation of the hostages, and why we need to act fast— Next, tell me the details about their deployment.」

「Yes Sir— the enemy is concentrated in the centre of the 6th zone that has been captured, and the borders. The forces garrisoned in the middle — in the Cultural Centre, is over one hundred, most of them are poorly trained militia. The bulk of them, 500 men, are guarding the borders, concentrated on the west side— our current position.」

「They leave the supervision of the hostages to amateurs and use their main forces to keep us at bay? An adequate arrangement.」

The white-haired officer noted from the enemy's deployment of forces.

「But that works out fine for us. Since the enemy base is filled with amateurs, the infiltration team will have an easier time.」 「That appears to be true, Second Lieutenant Rakkei who infiltrated the base reported 『Most of the militia are no different from strawman』.」

「Hah*! This cheeky remark is just like him. Compared to his last job, this is a walk in the park.」

Happy about how reliable his subordinate is, Jean surmise the strategy.

「I got the gist of the situation. We will cause a diversion outside while the infiltration team takes them out from the inside. This will increase their burden though — Any objections, Miara?」

「None. We can showcase our prowess easily.」

Miara said confidently. She then spent several minutes to tie down the details with Jean, and another messenger approached when they were almost done.

「—What did you say?」

Miara frowned when she heard that report.

「—My apologies, Jean. There's another thing I need to report to you.」

「Bad news?」

「Correct. A new name has been added to the VIP hostage list.」

Miara said that name with half tension and half confusion.

「Anarai Khan. The weird man who fled from the Empire to this place and calls himself a 『Scientist』.」

On the other hand, the subject in question— along with his poor assistant were in a dark place with a suffocating mouldy smell.

「Hmm. How troubling.」

In the space illuminated by a Lantern set to low power, the old sage stared at the low ceiling. Before him was the Luminous Sprite he borrowed from a Cultural Centre staff. His assistant Bajin who was resigned to his fate was lying at the other end with his Fire Sprite partner.

「What's wrong, Bajin? You seem really calm. Aren't you going to do my share of panicking this time?」

「I have gotten used to it... Ever since we escaped from the Empire, we had experienced similar things so many times.」

Bajin had gone tired from fuming and lying down, and sat up slowly. He stared at the ceiling just like the old man and mumbled.

「But just how big is this revolt? I hope Nazuna and the others didn't get caught up in this.」

「Hmm. The Kingdom Revival Faction seems to be behind this, but Kioka isn't naïve enough to let them take the capital. The guys patrolling appears to be militia not used to combat, so the area under their control probably isn't too big.」

「Then the best course of action is to wait for the army to rescue us. Even if this drags on, we have a mountain of food here.」

Bajin said as he looked at the cabinet behind him. The thick mouldy smell came from the drawers full of bread of various colours, and there was a lot of flour around them.

「... Bread with a long shelf life, developed at the request of the country. These are still prototypes being tested, and I never imagine we will use them in this way.」

「We have to eat them according to their date of production. Aside from any signs of rot or mould, remember to record the dryness and taste too. That's important.」

「Yes, yes. You are really particular about the taste, Professor, even though it's not part of the request.」

「『If the meals taste bad, then there won't be anything redeemable with war』── That's what Bada said.」

Anarai said nostalgically as he tore off a bite size portion from his half-eaten bread.

「I know the effect of high quality food on soldiers is significant. And the preservation of food isn't limited to the military, it can be used in the future to feed the masses during famine.」

「Professor, you make it sound cool, but I know the truth. Instead of research work to benefit society, you prefer to research the mould growing on the surface of the bread.」

Bajin scoffed after saying that. Anarai unhappily reached into the cabinet housing the experiments and shoved a mouldy bread to his assistant's face.

「Aren't you curious? Where do these red, blue, and yellow things come from!? As a Scientist, don't you want to observe the microscopic world that our eyes couldn't see!?」

「Wah, this tastes nasty! Professor, the bread with vinegar will taste awful no matter how we change things up.」

「That's why we need the budget to build a delicate microscope… Hey, listen to me!」

When Anarai was yelling angrily, a creaking sound came from the ceiling. The two of them looked up at the same time.

「... Did they notice?」

「Shh...! ... It's all because of how noisy you are, Professor…」

「It's your fault for not listening!」

The two of them persisted in arguing, and a voice came from above.

「— Is the one hiding here Professor Anarai Khan?」

The old man who was named looked suspicious. Bajin picked up a bread cutting knife from the cabinet, prepared for the worst. Sensing the two of them becoming guarded, the voice from the ceiling changed its tone.

「Relax, I'm from the Kioka army, I'm here to save you. I heard your conversation, is your assistant down there too?」

Anarai and Bajin looked at each other. It would be great if that were true, but could they trust that person?

「It's not safe to come out yet. I have something to inform you, may I come in?」

After considering it for a few seconds, Anarai couldn't hear multiple sounds of breathing, so he opened the locked secret door to the research department's basement. If this were a trick by the Kingdom Revival Faction, they would force their way in anyway.

「This place... looks like the underground warehouse of a bakery. It looks pretty much the same above too.」

A slender man with half his face masked walked into the darkness. At first glance, his attire looked similar to the military from the Revival Faction, but Anarai could tell he was speaking the truth a few seconds later. His movements were polished, unlike the militia who was there to make up numbers.

The old man who felt the situation had improved grunted, then picked up a bread nearby to offer to his guest.

「Want one? We are developing preserved food for military usage, and the opinions of a soldier will be great.」

「I just heard someone saying it tastes nasty, and I'm also in the midst of a mission… That aside, I personally will prefer the Professor to consider rice for military usage.」

「The supply of rice is unstable, so that will be difficult. The Empire has a plantation that produces rice, and they are treated as a luxury. I'm not particularly fixated on wheat, and having more paddy fields won't be too bad, but wheat has its advantage too —」

Anarai gave a lecture because he got a reply, and Bajin stopped him with an annoyed look.

「Let's leave that for later, and confirm the situation first… So, erm —」

「I'm Kioka Army Second Lieutenant Mon Rakkei. Please call me Rakkei.」

After his self-introduction, Rakkei quickly briefed them on the situation. The Kingdom Revival Faction had captured the Norandot eastern 6th zone with military force and was holding out in the Cultural Centre with a lot of hostages. The Kioka units had split up to work separately on resolving this crisis.

「—I see. That lines up with what I expected.」

「The government wants to suppress the rebel army before negotiations stall. On the orders of the commander acting on behalf

of the government, we will wipe out the enemy. We will try our best to minimize combat, but some clashes will be inevitable. Stray bullets might start flying around, so the best course of action will be for you to remain here until hostilities end.」

「We can hide, but what about the other hostages? You mentioned that there are more than 200 people confined in this building?」

「Our unit will let the hostages flee to the main road to the south as we wipe out the militia. The team outside will act in concert, which will enable most of them to escape safely. I can't guarantee that there won't be any casualties...」

Rakkei continued to explain smoothly, but he acknowledged that with the number of citizens they need to liberate, there will be a certain degree of uncertainty.

「Don't you want to minimize casualties to almost zero?」

The old sage could see his decisive thinking and made a bold proposal. Rakkei raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

「...Professor, do you have any proposals? I have heard about your wits and cunning.」

「Probably an offhand remark when people talk about how weird I am, right? Sigh, whatever. I understand your forces in the building are far fewer than the enemy garrisoned here, so we need to shave off their numbers effectively before overwhelming them. You are probably planning to use the layout of this Cultural Centre to fight, correct? The key words are "divide and conquer" — Rescue the hostages when the enemy is distracted. Am I right?」

Rakkei opened his eyes with surprise this time. Seeing his expression, Anarai deepened his smile and continued:

「I think you already know that the layout of the Cultural Centre is a little distorted.」 The old man tore a hole in the bag of flour

nearby, spilled the flour on the floor, and drew the map with his finger.

「The building is divided into the north and south wing, connected by just one narrow corridor. Originally, there is just the south wing, the north wing is a recent extension. Which means the people in the north wing can only contact the south wing through that corridor.」

Rakkei nodded. Anarai pointed to that sole passageway.

「We just have to draw the enemy to the north wing and then cut off this path, and we can divide them. Your team will need to take care of that part. The hostages are in the south wing — this area where the basement is, so the only problem left will be to clear out the enemy there. I have a suggestion —」

The old sage's voice dominated the trio's discussion.

「...Will this really work?」

「I swear on my name as a Scientist. And even if that part fails, the fallout won't be too serious. The corridor is narrow and just luring the enemy there will be really helpful — this terrain is great for holding off many people.」

Rakkei analysed the plan and nodded cautiously. He could tell that the old man's proposal wouldn't change the plans too much and offers the chance to gain more advantages.

「It's a surprise attack, so you will have the advantage in the first few minutes. During this time, you can draw most of the enemy to the north wing of the Cultural Centre, then clear out the militia watching the hostages to free them. This part will depend on your skills, but — I promise that your work will be much easier if that trap works.」

At this point, Anarai turned and patted the shoulder of his assistant. It was still dim, but Bajin didn't need to see with his eyes to know that the Professor was smiling like a child.

「Let us teach them a lesson, Bajin. The ingredients for bread can be turned into a scary weapon too.」



Not knowing that a chemical reaction would be happening on site, the white-haired officer was preparing to execute the plans he laid out.

「— It's time. Miara, take your team to position too.」

「Leave it to me. You be careful too, Jean.」

After receiving her orders, Miara straightened her back and saluted, then mounted her horse and rode off. Kasha saw her off with a stiff face and asked the youth beside her quietly.

「... You are going to fight this time?」

Jean immediately turned to her and laid out the map, squatting down to her eye level.

「Ms Kasha, I'm going to explain my plans specially for you.」

Kasha leaned forth unconsciously. Any child would be happy to hear that something was done specially for them.

「First— the Kingdom Revival Faction is concentrated in two places. That's the place before us — the Cultural Centre in the middle of the zone they captured.」

「I have never seen the Cultural Centre before.」

「Just imagine it to be a house much bigger than your home. Your father and mother are trapped inside, and I have sent 60 of my friends to hide inside and around the house.」

You have to keep this a secret, Jean said with a finger to his lips — Since the venue was the urban area filled with infiltration points, there was no way for the limited number of Kingdom Revival

Factionist to cover the huge zone they captured. They were powerless to stop the infiltration of the Phantom Unit.

「We will pretend to attack here, and when their attention is drawn to defend this place, our friends inside the building will use this chance to rescue the people who got caught. Your parents will leave the building after they are free and will escape out this way.」

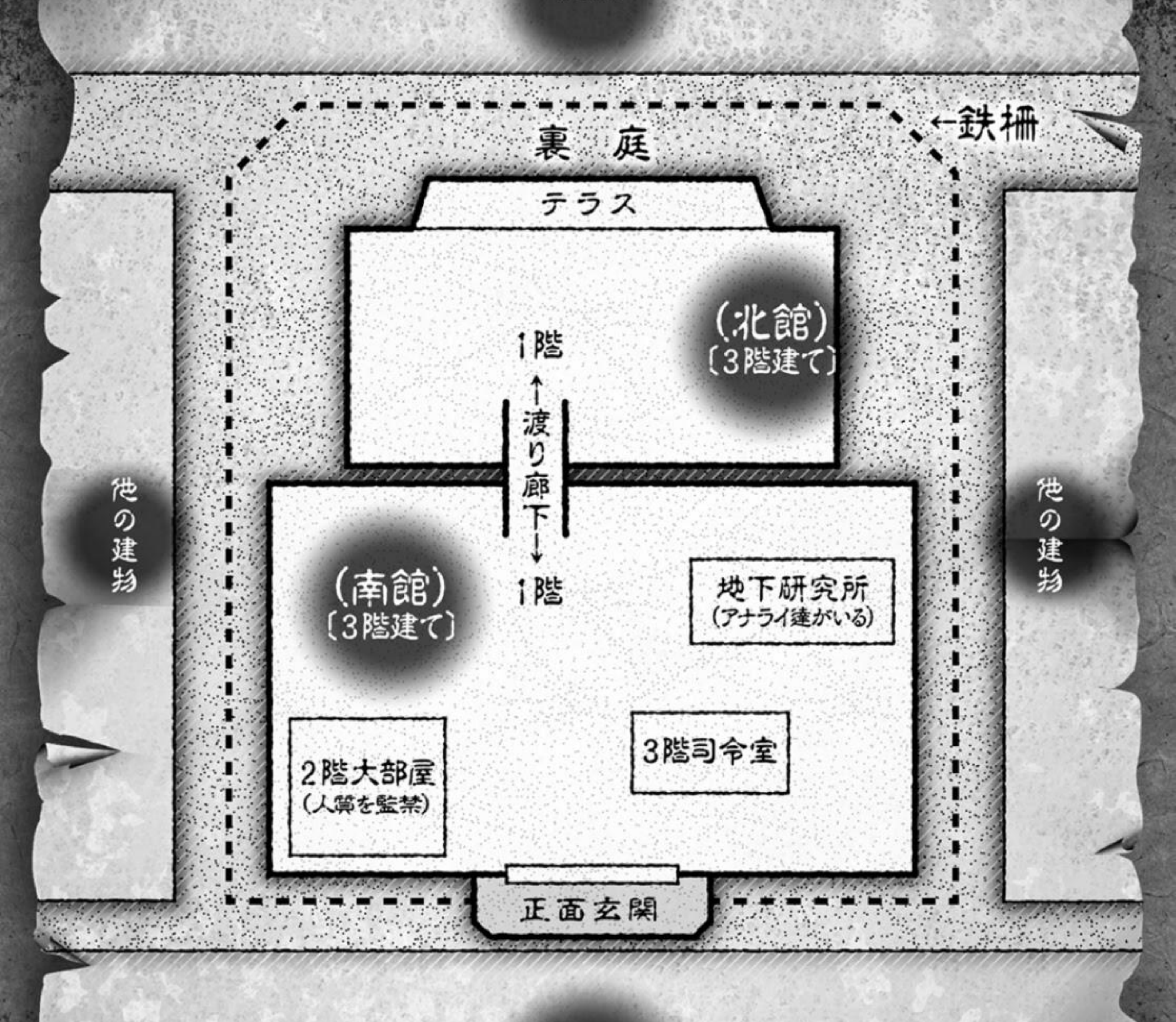
Even after the simplified explanation, it was difficult for someone as young as Kasha to understand it. The girl racked her brain to grasp the content, then looked at Jean with an uneasy face.

「... My mother can’t run fast.」

「Don’t worry, people from our side will fetch her.」

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Jean promised, kept the map and turned around.

「... It will be a problem if they are shameless enough to use the hostages as human shields. To avoid that, it will be crucial for the infiltration team to act swiftly.」

This was no longer an explanation to the girl, but a monologue. In contrast to the seriousness of the matter he mentioned, the white-haired officer wasn't worried and curled up the corners of his lips fearlessly.

「Since you assessed that the enemy is no different from strawman, then overcome the disadvantage in numbers. I'm counting on you, my reliable Phantoms.」



Most of the Kingdom Revival Factionists in the Cultural Centre were militia, but they have a basic command structure with veteran retired soldiers leading them gathered in the room used as a headquarters.

After reviewing the status reports submitted to him, the Commanding Officer sighed heavily.

「... So, we failed to seal off Sonebo Road. If we had blockaded that junction, we can drastically minimize the enemy's infiltration route.」

「My deep apologies. According to the report, they got distracted when an allied horse cart lost control during the erection of the barricade, and the enemy caught them off guard...」

「Save your excuses. We will sort out whose fault it is later.」

The Commanding Officer cut off his subordinate and the men sitting before him with stern eyes.

「Keep in mind that we aren't even at the starting line yet. To turn this captured zone into a Garuma residential area, we must use the citizens who 『kindly offered their assistance』 as chips to negotiate with the country. We need to hold out this base to force that Prime Minister to the negotiation table. Our hold on this place has to be so firm that he would consider the use of force to be too risky.」

During this short pause in his speech, one of his lieutenants raised his hand to express his opinion.

「If impressions matter, why don't we kill one out race hostage publicly?」

The Commanding Officer suppressed the urge to hold his head, then shook his head:

「... I'm not saying we need to rush and spoil the plan. Listen up, we are acting on the premise of justice. Officially, we are protesting and not revolting — this is just a demonstration against the Kioka government. The citizens in this building aren't hostages, but citizens who 『kindly offered their assistance』 in our protest. I hope everyone understand why meaningless assault against the citizens are prohibited.」

「It will be difficult to justify that with retired soldiers pointing their Wind Guns at citizens. Why not go all out and just admit we are revolting.」

「You will feel good to say that openly. But if you do that, will we have any future?」

The Lieutenant was speechless from this retort. The Commanding Officer glared at him and continued:

「I will say this again, we can't pull off this revolution through force alone, we need political support. There are many hidden factions who oppose the current Prime Minister's Assimilation Policies— especially the desegregation of residential zones. This

demonstration will stimulate the pride of those people 『Reclaim the place where Garuma people can live as Garuma people』— don't forget our motto.」

How much will they listen this time? The Commanding Officer tried to persuade them pessimistically. There were too many people who didn't understand they were a small extremist faction, and just wanted to solve the problem with violence.

「If we can legitimize our control of this zone for the long term, the affairs in the parliament will be to our advantage. Unhappiness with the Prime Minister's forceful methods will burst out all at once. We will be one step closer to our goal of pushing a pro-Garuma Senator to become the Prime Minister. We will then be one step closer to rebuilding our Kingdom. The first step to achieving our goal is to defend this zone stubbornly.」

The Commanding Officer patiently listed out the steps they would need to take. But most of his Lieutenants weren't happy with such a roundabout way of doing things, and it didn't go well with them.

「We can't show the masses that we don't have a firm control over this zone… Do your job properly and treat the citizens well. If you have any complaints, I will hear them later.」

Giving a long lecture now would just have an adverse effect, so the Commanding Officer wrapped things up briskly. The lieutenants got up unhappily and left the room.

The clicking of their tongues came on the other side of the closed door. Anger welled up in the heart of the Commanding Officer, and he smashed his fist onto the table.

「I explained it so clearly, and that's the attitude they give me!? I can't stand this… It can't be help that talent is thin, but the militia is incorrigibly rash!」

Only his close colleagues who worked with him together in the military were left behind, so he finally spoke his mind. A few retired

soldiers were commanding a large bulk of militia — that was their current predicament. The main mission was to watch the hostages instead of fighting, but managing the hot-headed militia was a pain.

Noticing the hardship of their supervisor, the men offered words of encouragement to him. At this moment, a comrade rushed in with a panicking face. 「—Report! Cultural Centre enemies spotted to the north! We can't make out their actual numbers because they are hiding in the dark, but they are bigger than a platoon!」

The Commanding Officer's face turned tense. Now wasn't the time to lament the unreasonableness of his men.

「They infiltrated our outer defence lines? That's within expectations. Send the troops to the north for mass suppressive fire! We have hostages — No, citizen collaborators, so they can't force their way in!」 To put his men at ease, he gave firm instructions quickly. The messenger ran back with his orders, and another militia showed up nervously 「R-Report! Some soldiers contacted the enemy in the basement here!」

「C-contact? The scale of the enemy?」

「Unsure. Patrols found traces that appears to be from the enemy, and quickly turned back...」

The Commanding Officer didn't respond immediately this time. After a few seconds, he shook his head agitatedly.

「— Impossible! The bulk might be militia, but we have over a hundred people watching the place! You lot have to be blind to allow the enemy to infiltrate the building!?」

「I-I agree with your assessment… The soldiers who contacted the enemy suspect there is a secret passage. Since they came out of the basement, there might be a path that leads outside there...」

The Commanding Officer thought with a bitter face when he heard the unexpected proposition.

「... Yes, that might be possible. VIPs will visit the Cultural Centre from time to time, so there might be an emergency exit route for them. We should have checked for that carefully... However...」

The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry. The Commanding Officers took tens of seconds to accept this fact before finally issuing his instruction.

「... In any case, we must eliminate this possibility. Right, send the troops to that basement! Be on alert against the enemy, send 20 men!」

The militia who received the orders from the messenger were nothing close to being cautious.

「— The top ordered us to check the situation! Everyone who is free gather round, twenty men will go over together!」

「Right. You are the one who saw the enemy earlier, so lead the way!」

「Oh, leave it to me!」

A slender militia— no, Rakkei who was disguised as a militia replied energetically. He assumed the identity of a real militia, so he wouldn't be found out during a roll call.

They took the bait. He smiled to himself in secret and brought the group of militias downstairs just as planned. The ground floor of the Cultural Centre has a corridor connected to several rooms. At the end of the corridor was the temporary Research Laboratory assigned to Anarai.

「So this is the room... the last time I went in, there's bread scattered everywhere for some reason.」

「I'm going in!」

Rakkei rushed into the room without giving them time to think. They were dumbstruck by his recklessness, but since he volunteered to take the dangerous job, the militias didn't complain. After the

room was confirmed to be clear of any enemy, they entered the room.

「Hey— look over there!」

Rakkei immediately pointed at a specific place. The militia who walked over tilted their heads confusedly.

「What's this? Bags of flour?」 「There's so many of them.」 「These weren't here the last time I checked.」

Bags of flour were stacked in a corner of the room. As the militia tried to figure out what they were seeing, Rakkei planted his own explanation.

「Move the bags of flour away, there must be a secret passage there! —Hey, give me a hand!」

His lack of hesitation convinced the militia. They worked together to shift the bags of flour away, which then tore and spilled out the flour. The militia screamed as the dust flew into the air, and only Rakkei continued working by himself.

「Uwah— Calm down! It's good that you are motivated, but don't throw flour everywhere!」

「There's no time to take it easy, if we don't seal the passage now, the enemy might get in! Just bear with the dust a little, you won't die from it!」

Rakkei was moving the bags too excitedly, and the room turned white from the dust in the air. Seeing that the timing was ripe, he nonchalantly squeezed through the militia and returned to the entrance of the room.

「There's not enough space, we have to sift the flour to the back. Hey~ you guys in the corridor! Stop slacking off and come help!」

After getting the militia in the corridor in, the stage was set. Rakkei walked out of the room alone and gently closed the door.

「—? Hey, why did you shut the door?」 「Wait, stop squeezing in!」 「Even if you say that, I can't see with the flour everywhere —」

The militia at the front suddenly saw a small figure in the space where flour was floating in the air.

「— Hmm? Who's your partner?」

A Fire Sprite was there by its lone self. As the militia holding the bag of flour looked on, it raised its arms and lit a fire with its 「Fire Hole」.

「— Huh?」

The next moment, the vision of everyone in that space was filled by a scorching light.

「「「「「「「Hyaaaa!」」」」」」」

The militia screamed as their skin and eyes got burned. No one knew what happened, and the cramped basement was suddenly transformed into hell.

「Ahhh...!」 「It burns! It burns!」 「Uwahhhh!」

「W-What's going on!」 「Damn it, open up! Let me out!」

The 19 men who got burned squeezed towards the exit. However, the door was blocked from the outside wouldn't budge. A strong sense of dizziness overwhelmed them, and their legs started to wobble.

「Ughh, my head hurts...」 「I can't... breath...」 「Water... Someone, give me water...」 「......」

The banging on the door gradually grew weaker. Shortly after, even the sound of the scratching on the door ceased completely. Sensing the silence on the other side of the door, the old man who proposed the plan grunted.

「It seems to be going smoothly.」

Rakkei who placed his ear on the door nodded and turned.

「They are not even screaming anymore… are you a wizard?」

「Don't jest with me, this is a proper scientific phenomenon.」

Enraged by the improper compliment, Anarai started ranting without anyone asking.

「I call this phenomenon Wheat Bomb. It refers to small dust like particles in the air enhancing the efficiency of burning. If the condition is right, the explosion can be powerful enough to kill.」

「In order to determine those conditions, we got in mortal peril more plenty of times.」

Bajin retorted softly from behind. The old sage brushed it off by clearing his throat and continued:

「There's also oxygen deprivation too. The burning used up all the oxygen in the enclosed room, and there were lots of injured people panting too. The people inside should have fainted now.」

Rakkei shrugged. His eyes were filled with surprise.

「... Even after hearing the explanation, I still feel this is a form of magic. I have never heard of Wheat being used as a weapon to defeat people.」

「You aren't too stupid, but your prejudice gets in the way. Why don't you study science under me? I will make your stubborn brain more flexible.」

「What a scary invitation. I will consider it after this job is done.」

Everyone could tell that he was just being polite. Ignoring Anarai who clicked his tongue with regret, Rakkei looked down the other end of space.

「I'm going back up, please stay here until we are ready for the escape. Is there really no risk of a fire breaking out?」

「None. There won't be enough oxygen left for a fire.」

The old man said as if it was obvious. Feeling respect towards his attitude, the shadow looked away to change his mood.

「I'm grateful to the both of you for making my work easier — Well then, please wait here for a moment.」

「... Have the team that went to the basement report back yet?」



After not getting any follow up report for several minutes, the Commanding Officer grew anxious. If just checking things up got him so anxious, he might as well see for himself — when the Commanding Officer was about to stand up from the urge, a messenger rushed back just in time.

「A report from the basement team. As suspected, we found a secret passage there, and the twenty men team have started sealing the entrance.」

This report made the Commanding Officer open his eyes wide.

「So there really is a secret passage... we are lucky that we can seal it before it becomes a fatal problem.」

He thought his men were mistaken, so the report surprised him. Since the matter had been dealt with, he sighed in relief. No one in the room realized that the situation had already deteriorated catastrophically.

「Report from the north wing. They are keeping up suppressive fire, but the enemy showed no signs of retreating. They are requesting to maintain their current numbers to keep up the defences.」

「Granted. But the twenty men sent to the basement aren't back yet, so our forces here are a little thin...」

He had been shaking his legs unconsciously for a while now, and the Commanding Officer finally stood up, having lost to his feelings of unease.

「I can't settle down. I will go to the large room holding the citizens too, it will be a big problem if they try to pull anything off because of the chaos.」

He muttered as if he was looking for some excuse, then left the Ops Room with two guards. The militia who came to report earlier— Rakkei in disguise, followed nonchalantly behind. Including him, the four of them went down to the ground floor and into the large room where the citizens were held captive. After opening the door and stepping in, they were greeted by eyes filled with fear. The Commanding Officer wasn't fazed by this situation and spoke boldly.

「I'm the representative of the resistance group, Bukaios. I apologize for the inconvenience imposed on you, but please understand that we have no intention of using violence. If you have any concerns, please tell us. Women who wish to take care of their children can use the breastfeeding room next door.」

Just like the instructions he gave his subordinates to treat the citizens well, his attitude was far more gentlemanly than the militias. Rakkei sighed in his heart— since he was so sensible, then he should snap out of his delusion of reviving his old nation.

「Commanding Officer Sir, may I request something?」

Rakkei seized the chance to walk over slowly and speak up. The Commanding Officer furrowed his brows unhappily because someone spoke to him from an unexpected angle.

「Hey, stop fooling around. I'm addressing the citizens —!」 He didn't get to finish because Rakkei struck him in the jaw and knocked him out.

「Just go to sleep... I don't think you can hear me now, though.」

Rakkei said emotionlessly. The two guards who followed from the Ops Room raised their Wind Gun in a panic.

「Y-You!」「What are you—?」

Barrels were shoved onto their backs. That was done by militias who sneaked up to them — members of the 「Phantom Unit」 who disguised themselves just like Rakkei.

At the same time, the Revival factionists in the room were rapidly disarmed. After seizing control in just a few seconds, Rakkei turned and said plainly to the surprised citizens.

「Everyone, please stay quiet— I'm from the Kioka army rescue team, we are here to save you. As you can see, the boss of the rebel faction has been subdued, and now, we will escort you to a safe place. In order to let everyone see their family again safely, please follow my instructions.」

He signalled with his eyes, and the shadows ran to the citizens, placing their knives on the ropes tying each group of three citizens together.

「We will cut off your ropes next, those who have been freed please line up here, and stay there before my next instruction. If you move recklessly, I won't be able to guarantee your safety. I know everyone is anxious, but please stay calm. From my experience, it is common for the chaos during an escape to cause casualties.」

Rakkei added a dangerous word calmly to keep the citizens on edge.

With the enemy suppressed, the top priority was to prevent the citizens from running amok and hurting themselves. Managing a group of untrained civilians was more mentally draining than fighting a battle.

「... Really now.」

If the civilians had learned the basics of moving in a group during elementary education, the shadows would have an easier time.

Rakkei smiled wryly at the fact that the current Prime Minister was including such knowledge in his education policy — Discovering a reason why the current administration should continue amused him.

「Please calm down and wait in line. Don't worry, there's plenty of time.」



「— Orders from the Ops Room, we are to hold our defences with the forces on hand.」

When the situation changed drastically in the south wing of the Cultural Centre, the militias in the north wing received forged orders to continue their defence.

「I'm glad that I don't have to see people of the other races. Whenever I see one, I feel like kicking them.」

「I feel the same. If we have to stay under the same roof for a few more days, I'm not confident things will end peacefully.」

Most of the soldiers garrisoned in the Cultural Centre were militias, and there were many who wanted to abuse their power to inflict violence. These people who were happy as long as they got to shoot at the enemy didn't really care about things they wouldn't see.

That was the key to the plan. The fake news from the Shadows, the subpar quality of the militia, only one corridor connecting the north and south wings, and being cut off from the outside world physically meant these militias had been isolated.

「You guys are dumb, just bring them to somewhere where others can't see you before you torture them. Like going to the toilets, there are plenty of times when the other races leave the big room, right?」

「Good idea, I will try it out tonight.」

The despicable suggestion stirred up laughter. They didn't know that they would never have the chance to torture captured citizens.

「It's noisy back there… Did something happened to the Cultural Centre?」

Some distance away from the militia that was being fooled, in one corner of the rebel forces border defences, one of the soldiers felt something was wrong and looked back. Unlike the uncouth Cultural Centre militias, the soldiers here had gone through official training and were keen enough to sense something was amiss behind them.

「If they need reinforcements, they will send messengers. Alright, eyes to the front —」

But they were engaged by the enemy forces and couldn't spare the effort to act on their gut feeling. The crucial information that a soldier noticed was dismissed a few seconds later because of the tension of the battlefield.

「Enemy units approaching! Raise your weapons!」

The commander ordered. The presence of the enemy breaking through the obstacles grew stronger. A soldier with keen eyesight saw the weapon approaching from a slope and cried out with a distressed voice.

「Sir, it's a Blast Cannon!」

「Don't panic, it's just one! This is inside the Norandot city, the Republic Army won't bombard the roads around the capital! Their goal is to destroy the roadblock!」

This was still within expectations, so the commander wasn't fazed. Compared to fighting in open plains without any civilians, their tactics would be very restricted in an urban setting. The rebel forces were outnumbered and had to find a way to victory by using these restrictions.

「The cannon is pointing right at us! A-Are they going to direct fire from close range...?」

「Don't falter! Everyone spread out!」

The commander cautiously observed the movement of the cannon and ordered his men to take evasive actions. They would be helpless if there was a row of cannons on the road, but one single cannon wasn't a threat.

The cannon spewed fire shortly after the soldiers spread out, and the projectile hit the roadblock right in the centre. A quarter of the wooden obstacle shattered, but no one got hurt. The commander rallied his men who were shocked by the loud cannon and ordered them to return fire.

「Don't be afraid, use this chance to charge! Suppress the Blast Cannon! Don't let them fire again!」

Loading a second round would need a lot of time, so his plan was to use this chance to suppress and seize the Blast Cannons. Realizing the intent of their superior, the soldiers climb over the obstacle and attack — Horses suddenly galloped up to them and block their way.

「What—!」「Uwah?」

The foot soldiers were no longer protected by the obstacle and were scattered by the charging cavalry. A girl on horseback declared the end of this nightmarish scene.

「— Surrender. I will spare your live if you yield.」

Judging that the enemy forces had dwindled beyond the point of putting up any resistance, Major Miara Gin urged them to surrender. The Revival Faction commander couldn't accept that, and his face kept cramping.

「... How is this possible? There was no signs of a cavalry unit of this scale being mobilized —」「That's what happens if you only watch the roads marked on a map.」

Miara answered with pride and tiredness… From the courtyards of private residence to the private roads, there were little known byroads avoided by people. She kept apologizing to the private owners when the cavalry passed through these roads. She finally made it here with the cavalry after avoiding detection by the enemy. In contrast to the extravagant result, this was a battle that required a lot of willpower. 「We have checked all the roads accessible by horses! How did you —」

「That's just a question of horsemanship training. More importantly, it's the difference in our attitude towards war — Enough talk.」

Miara stopped the conversation and aimed her Crossbow from horseback. The Revival Factionist commander admitted defeat with that and laid down his Wind Gun. After confirming that, Miara shouted.

「Suppression complete— quickly, disarm them. We will pick up the civilians after that.」



「W-Will that be fine? Walking so brazenly in the middle of the road.」

「I don't know... But that person instructed us to do that.」

The civilians whispered as they walked down the road southwards in 4 disorderly columns. Rakkei who was leading them stopped and said.

「It seems that someone is here to fetch us.」

Anarai and Bajin behind Rakkei looked down the road. Shortly after, a platoon of cavalry approached quickly. The distance was

closed quickly, and the cavalry stopped in neat ranks before the civilians.

「Thank you for waiting, everyone. Kioka Army Major Miara Gin and my 40 men will take over as escorts for the citizens.」 Miara who was at the fore of the ranks saluted from horseback. Rakkei looked at her with friendly eyes and nodded.

「I will leave them in your care. I need to turn back — and return to my comrades running the diversion all this while.」

The conversation ended and Rakkei turned just as he said he would, to return to the Cultural Centre. When he passed by Anarai, Anarai clapped his hands once.

「— I remember now. You are that young naval officer from 『that side』, correct?」

Rakkei stopped abruptly. The sudden accusation made him stiff, and the old man recounted what he remembered.

「I remember you were called Naval Commander Kanron? I thought I saw you before, so we did meet in a Naval base before. I'm only sure after seeing your face in the light. So, you worked in espionage. Fate sure works strange for us to meet again in a different nation —」

「—Professor. I don't know what you are saying, please stop.」 Rakkei who can't stand it anymore cut him off. This was humiliating for him — his pride as a Phantom was creaking as his respect for the old man continued to grow.

「I want to ask one final thing— You really are a Wizard, aren't you?」

「I said I'm a Scientist!」

Anarai corrected angrily. Scientists were scarier than Wizards — The man who used to be Danmier Kanron etched that into his mind and carried on.

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「Good— looks like it's over for now.」

The messenger reported that the citizens have been liberated safely, and the white-haired officer relaxed his shoulders for the first time in a while.

「Leave the roadblock to the Second Company, Third to Fifth Company return to your posts and keep up the encirclement around the captured zone. Don't give them any chance to resupply.」

After making the necessary arrangements, Jean turned to the girl beside him. His gentle smile subtly hinted his intention to Kasha, and her eyes lit up with glee.

「You are really patient. Let's go fetch your parents, Ms Kasha.」



「... Report from the front. The army's rescue team succeeded, and have rescued all the hostages.」 The report by the clerk silenced everyone in the Committee Chambers. The accusations they prepared were now useless, and the Senators who disliked the current Administration stood up puzzledly.

「W-What about the casualties? Since they were rescued by force, there must many casualties.」

「According to the reports, the only deaths are from the rebel factions. Only a few civilians and members of the rescue team suffered light injuries. The plan of the army is to encircle the rebel forces and urge them to surrender.」

There was no information for the Senators to refute, so they could only sit in silence. The man in the dark blue suit at the window accepted this silence with his back and said quietly.

「Gentlemen, I'm glad the matter you are worried about has been resolved — it seems I can still enjoy the scenery outside this window.」

Clang— after saying that, the sound of metal came from the man's hand. The Senators who opposed him snapped out of it and started yelling:

「That's right! I must criticize you for your forceful way of governance! If you keep up your reckless reforms, the same thing might happen again!」

He wasn't targeting anything specific, so that was just hot air. Having missed the chance to back away, the other Senators who had been silent all this while spoke:

「... Senator Majia. Was that a threat?」

「—What?」

Majia's face started to twitch. Another Senator followed up.

「Indeed. Before accusing the Prime Minister of any wrongdoing, you should worry about your own future. It seems that you have frequent contact with the Garuma faction recently.」

When that was pointed out, the Senator's face turned pale. The others who lambasted the Prime Minister earlier didn't defend him after he dug his own grave. Someone who wasn't aware that the tables had turned couldn't survive in the Kioka political scene anyway. 「Criticize away, I will hear you out sincerely.」

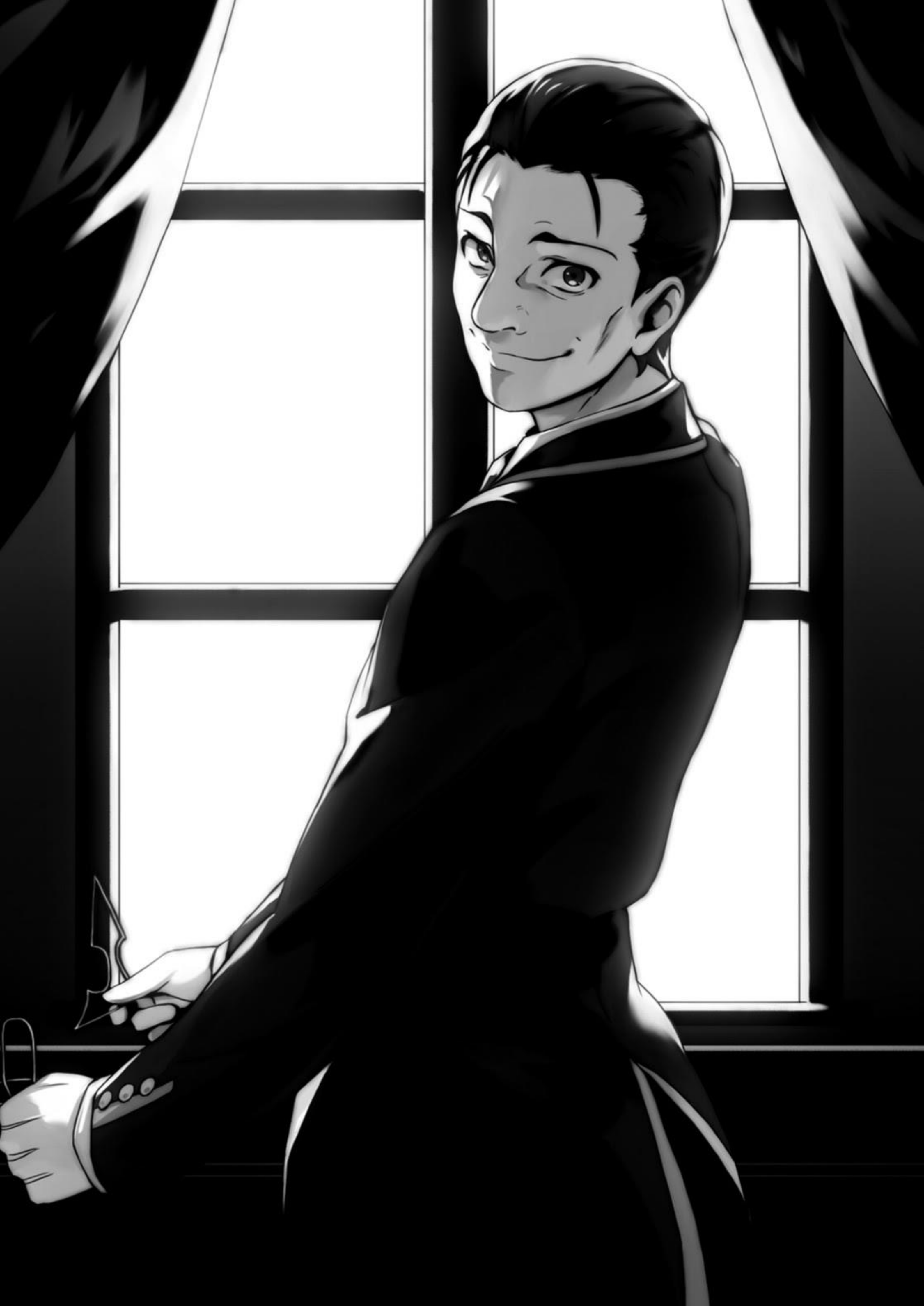
The man who had been looking out the window all this while slowly turned towards the Senators. He had a medium built and wore a dark blue jacket and pants without any crease, with a pair of

untangled link-ring puzzle. His big eyes, nose and mouth wasn't handsome at all, but left a deep impression for some reason.

「However, I will still be here. If the citizens still wants me here, this fact won't ever change.」

The head of state for the Kioka Republic, Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii. The face which the Kioka citizens were most familiar with had the smile of a politician completely separate from what he was actually thinking.

The temporary storm subsided, and no one could wipe his smile away.



※

「—The tension on the streets are weakening. Jean handled the matter splendidly.」

The buffed man Taznyado Harrah, who was leading a platoon, commented as he looked sideways at the relief on the faces of pedestrians on the streets. He was promoted to Major on the coattails of Jean, but the number of troops he could bring into the capital was limited to 40. And only because of the enhanced security around the Parliament house. This was a rare chance.

「Of course, our boss won't screw up here!」

His petite adjutant Sergeant Major Mita Kenshi puffed her body up and declared unwaveringly. She was way shorter than him, and Harrah patted her head almost on reflex.

「That's right. We have been relaxed the entire time because we are aware of that.」

「Like I said, don't touch the head of a maiden so brazenly～!」

Sergeant Major Mita grabbed the hand on her head and struggled. The two of them advanced in the meantime and stopped shortly after when they came across a different platoon.

「Major Harrah? It's almost time to change shift for guard duty, are you here to relieve us?」

「That's it, Major Sandis.」

Harrah greeted warmly. Major Sandis, his fellow officer around his age, replied:

「I just heard news that Jean Arkinex performed magnificently again. He is really the personification of competence to resolve a hostage situation so splendidly.」

「The Garuma extremist acted stupidly too. Jean would never lose to that rag-tag bunch of militia.」

Harrah grunted and Major Sandis nodded with an awkward smile.

「That's true— Enough chat, time to change shifts, Major Harrah.」

「It will be great if I can do that —」

Harrah scratched his head. His warmth was completely gone as he glared at Sandis.

「— But I can't do that, since you are going to do something stupid too.」

Harrah's men walked forth to his sides and aimed their Wind Guns. Raising a hand to stop his subordinates from engaging in battle, Major Sandis said loudly with his expression unchanged:

「... What's the meaning of this, Major Harrah? Do you know what it means to point your guns at a fellow soldier?」

「This is hard for me too. We know each other, and if it is possible, I would want to fight alongside you to the end.」

「Tell me, what are you suspecting me of?」

「It's not a suspicion, our boss already saw through the revolt in the city is nothing but a big diversion for the real plan to capture the parliament house.」

Seeing that his lips trembled slightly, Harrah continued:

「When an incident like that happens in the city, the security around the parliament building will be tightened. The units that usually wouldn't be permitted to enter the city could then walk brazenly into Norandot... I think the idea isn't bad, and is very reasonable for a plan to capture the headquarters with a small force.」

「There should be a limit to your wild speculations. Why would I do such a thing? My ancestor is the Nomadic tribe of horsemen, Mamulan, and has nothing to do with Garuma. I have never expressed any dissent towards the establishment either. I even voted for the current Prime Minister in the last election.」

He insisted on his innocence, but Harrah just shook his head with a serious face.

「Garuma Extremist isn't the only group dissatisfied with the current government… What you can't accept is the policy of promoting agriculture in the former Mamulan territories, correct?」

When he pointed that out, the air around Major Sandis changed. With the pricking feeling of hostility and killing intent on his skin, Harrah continued calmly:

「With the increase in population, Kioka is in a period of development and needs to secure enough farmlands. Emphasis has been placed on the staple food, wheat. But expanding the wheat fields requires a lot of manpower. Not the tribesman riding horses on the plains, but farmers tolling the fields.」

「......」

「The government is pushing for the nomads from the former Mamulan territories to take up farming, and of course, subsidies will be provided. Ditching the horses and picking up hoes — that's how you see it.」

Major Sandis ground his teeth audibly. Signalling his men to ready themselves, Harrah concluded:

「There are already volunteers in some zones to settle down and farm the land. Your hometown is set to be transformed completely into farmlands… That's unacceptable to you, Major Sandis, descendant of the plains tribesman.」

His silence was the most damning confirmation.

「Let me say this first, there's no point in trying to fudge things through. We allowed you to move freely all this time to draw out your collaborators, the evidence against you is already rock solid. Save your excuses for the court martial.」

Hinting that resistance was futile, Harrah urged his colleague to surrender. Forced into a corner, Major Sandis squeezed out these words:

「... Let me off, Harrah.」

「......」

「If I remember correctly, you hail from the Mamulan tribes too. Then you should understand my thinking — There's no way I can accept the land where my ancestors roamed being reduced to mere farmland, wiping away the pride of our tribes.」

Harrah was silent. Unable to discern if he was agreeing or not, Major Sandis grew anxious.

「But— what's even more unforgettable to me is that most of my fellow Mamulan tribesman not feeling worried about the current situation!」 His voice drenching with hate reverberated in the air, Major Sandis' eyes turned stern as he said to his comrade who was a head taller than him.

「I understand that multiracial harmony is the pledge of the Kioka Republic. But Harrah, do you dare say there is no deception in this pledge? As we optimize society for the progress of the nation and people, we are losing our cultures behind the scenes. The songs and legends of our heroes are written down into dry passages in history books, children learn mathematics instead of horsemanship. The bottles filled with white horse milk wine now contain black grape wine instead.

More convenient, more common, more logical — a country built on such slogans chills me to the bone. Even if it brings us prosperity in the future.」

Harrah sighed after hearing Major Sandis' true feelings. How sad — he didn't emphasize with Sandis at all.

「... I understand how you feel, but don't make this more difficult than it has to be, Major Sandis. As a citizen of Kioka, it will be meaningless if we don't strive to achieve greater heights than the six former nations we inherit this land from. Just like how the Kingdom Revival Faction's goal of reviving their country is out of the question. You do understand that, right?」

「......!」

「We have to build a country that never existed anywhere in the world before, and we can never reach that goal if we are held back by our past. No matter what people like you say, I will never doubt the goal Jean wants to achieve.」

Seeing Harrah sticking firmly to his guns, Major Sandis looked disappointed.

「... I thought you were my comrade at the most fundamental level.」

「Sorry for not meeting your expectations.」

Harrah apologized with a mixture of sincerity and sarcasm. The Mamulan Tribes Federation, a nomadic people that ride horses on the plains— the difference between how fixated they were on their heritage resulted in a gulf between them.

「Because of my size, the horses dislike me when I mount them, so I never liked horse riding. After enlisting with the army, I avoided postings related to horse riding — If I didn't take this detour, I would never have met Jean, Miara and this person over here, Sergeant Major Mita.」

「......」

「My legacy isn’t the tribes and heritage, but right here. I hope there will be more people like me in the future. To you, someone who has the same ideas as me must look like an enemy.」

Harrah announced as he looked at Sandis in the eyes, Sergeant Major Mita beside him raised her Wind Gun and was ready to shoot— The two pairs of eyes from different elevations showed their determination.

「... So there’s no stopping the tide of the times, huh?」 Major Sandis relaxed his clenched fists and muttered vexingly. He wasn’t deranged enough to start a meaningless battle in the city that might harm the citizens.

His platoon surrendered as advised. There were no further casualties in Norandot city on that day.

Chapter 2

The Hero and the Scientist

Not limited to just the military, the management of any organization would get exponentially more complicated as it grows and would require specialized departments. One of them would be logistics — the transportation of manpower and resources, building and maintenance of facilities, a group sneered at by the troops on the frontlines.

「Ahh～ damn it! This will exceed the budget...!」

A male soldier from the Logistics Department complained as he looked through the papers on his table. Aside from the resources needed for a garrisoned unit, he had to indent the food for every military campaign. The budget given by the government wasn't that plentiful, so it was difficult to meet the demands of the frontlines while adhering to the budget.

「Which one? Let me take a look.」

A hand from behind took his document. He looked back and opened his eyes wide at the sight of the famous white-haired officer.

「Mum*, the estimated price of salt is too high. Tell the salt supplier that the military will take care of the transport, and bargain for a 20% discount. We can probably get an even cheaper price through negotiation but keep it to 20% here. If we slash the price too harshly, the suppliers might mix things into the salt to make up numbers.」

Jean ignored the surprised man and gave his suggestion one sidedly. The soldier finally remembered that his predecessor did teach him this trick.

「T-Thank you—」

He wanted to offer his thanks, but the figure behind him was already gone. The soldier looked around him and saw the white-haired officer giving advice to a female soldier two seats away.

「Don’t stamp it. That document says the supply point is warehouse 37, but it should have burned down 4 years ago. Investigate where the resources went, it had probably been embezzled by some despicable fool.」

「Y-Yes Sir...!」

The female soldier stopped herself from stamping the document after he reminded her.

「Alright then～」 After giving appropriate advice to several people, Jean nodded at the middle of the room.

「Everything seems fine. Sorry for disturbing your work, keep it up.」

After saying that to the surprised soldiers, he left the room. Jean then ran into his adjutant Miara who was searching for him.

「So you are here, Jean... So you are wreaking havoc in the Logistics Department today?」

「Wreaking havoc sounds so nasty. I’m just offering suggestions when they are stuck in their work, or anything that I seem out of the ordinary. The Logistics Department is the legs of the army, if they don’t operate properly, the entire army will get bogged down.」

「You are right, but there are some people in various departments that don’t like you, be careful not to taunt them unnecessarily.」

Miara repeated her advice that she knew he wouldn’t heed. No one could change Jean’s habit of inspecting other places when he didn’t have any work on hand.

「The Kingdom Revival Faction rebellion some time ago was resolved peacefully due to your efforts. This might seem natural given your abilities, objective speaking, you are too prominent. It will

be better for you to lay low for a while. There are heaps of people in this building who are envious of your meteoric rise and want to pull you down —」

「Hey——! Wait up—!」

When she was about to formally get into her lecture, a shrill voice got their attention. A few soldiers were chasing something in front of them and Jean said intrigued:

「Oh, what happened? Don't run around the corridor in the base.」

「M-Major General Arkinex! And adjutant Major Gin too, my apologies for this unsightly scene.」

The soldiers who were stopped salute frantically. When Jean demanded for an explanation, one of them said awkwardly:

「Well... When we were inspecting mail for the base, we found —」

「She's there! We will get you this time!」

A soldier in front yelled. Jean followed the soldiers who jogged over and witnessed a surprising scene.

「Mischievous wench, you can't get away! I will throw you out!」

「No～! Let me see Jean! I have been telling you that all this while!」

A familiar girl who was about ten years old shouted at the soldier who was grabbing her arm. When he heard his name, the white-haired officer interjected:

「—Ms Kasha? I never expected to meet you here.」

「Jean!」

The girl's face beamed after finding her target. The soldier let her go and she ran straight for Jean, surprising everyone.

「M-Major General Arkinex, do you know her?」

「Yah*, she's my friend. A girl who acted more bravely during an incident recently.」 Jean gave a simple explanation of what happened and acknowledged the girl as his friend. His support made Kasha puffed her chest out.

「So, what can I do for you, Ms Kasha? I'm happy to see you but hiding in cargo isn't good. You will freak them out, you know?」

「But... When I tried to go in from the entrance, the guard chased me away. I think of many ideas to get in, and this feels like the best way.」

The girl grinned. Jean nodded and turned to the others.

「Mum*, did you hear that? She has inspired the base's security system, so everyone has to be mentally prepared to uncover people trying to smuggle in with the cargo.」

Kasha had the advantage of being petite, but a kid infiltrating the base highlighted the problem with the security. Understanding what Jean was hinting at, the soldiers hug their head sullenly. Jean thought about how he could improve the security as he asked Kasha.

「I understand that you reached here through an amazing display of wits. So, why do you want to meet me?」

「I want to thank you! I haven't thank you properly yet.」

The girl said with an innocent voice and smiled at Jean.

「Thank you for saving father and mother, they are both not hurt. My brother cried, but he's fine now. It's all thanks to you!」

Seeing her thanked him with a bright expression, Jean couldn't spoil the mood and scold her. He squat down to her eye level with a smile and said:

「You're welcomed. What I did is trivial compared to your efforts, but I'm happy to hear you say that.」

Jean took Kasha's hand, signalled to Miara with his gaze before heading to the stairs.

「We shouldn't get in the way of their work, let's go.」

「What happened just now is what I call being prominent.」

After leaving the base, that was the first thing the exasperated Miara said. Jean nodded with an awkward smile.

「I know that, that's why I left the base as soon as I could.」

「I want to praise you for that wise judgement, but what do you plan to do next? If you're sending the child home, I will prepare a horse.」

Miara suggested, but Kasha grabbed Jean's pants and shook her head.

「No～! I don't want to go home yet～!」

「I didn't expect you to say that... but Kasha, your family will be worried about you if you return late, right? Did you tell your parents where you are going before leaving home?」

Ughh～ the older girl understood how Kasha's parents would feel and gave a warning, and Kasha couldn't refute her. Miara sighed when things were just as she expected. The girl seemed to have learned to take the initiative to act in a negative sense.

「That's no good. Okay, send a messenger to her home with this message: 『Your daughter is with the Kioka Army Major General Jean Arkinex. We will escort her home in the evening, please don't worry.』」

When she heard what Jean said, Miara turned around in surprise.

「— You are taking that child with you? But why?」

「Mum*, it's about that incident last time, there's someone I want to bring her along to thank. This is a good chance.」

The white-haired officer said with a bold smile. She could tell that he had other motivations, but Miara still accepted it begrudgingly.

「Let's go— Kasha, is this your first time riding a horse?」

「You are taking me with you?」

Kasha's eyes shone. The three of them started their strange journey.



「Ahh～... I like the atmosphere here the most～」

Anarai muttered with a frown as he took a sip of steaming tea.

The researchers led by Bajin were moving around a messy room full of experimental equipment and ingredients. This is a Scientific Research Laboratory funded by the Kioka government, built on a hill on the outskirts of Norandot.

「I'm envious on how carefree you are, Professor… I'm really afraid that the government will make us pay for the repairs of the Cultural Centre we blew up.」

「There's no way the government will send us the bill for that. We actively helped to resolve the incident, they should give us a reward instead?」

「That's true. Back in the Empire, all the experiments he ran could be used against us in an inquisition trial. I still can't forget those unhappy memories —」

As Bajin chatted with the Professor, he focused on the petri dish before him, dripping liquid drop by drop with a glass tube. In the midst of doing so, a bell informing them of a visitor rang sharply.

「Uwah! —Speak of the devil.」

「That's just a visitor, calm down, Bajin— Who is it?」

The senior female researcher Nazuna answered the door. She saw two young soldiers and a little girl — a strange trio.

「I'm Major General Jean Arkinex from the Kioka Army, the commander for the task force against unrest in the city some days

ago. My subordinates informed me that Professor Anarai Khan was of great assistance during the operation, so my adjutant and I am here to offer our thanks.」

「Oh, how kind of you — did you bring your daughter with you?」

Nazuna said the first thing that came to her mind when she saw this trio, and Miara blushed immediately.

「N-No! This child is just a normal civilian, and he is just my superior at work —」

Beside Miara who was panicking in an amusing way, Jean who was the same as usual said:

「She is my adjutant Miara Gin, and this child was involved in that incident. Kasha, do you know how to greet others?」

「Yes! I'm Kasha Masukusu, ten years old! I like dried apricots!」

Kasha introduced herself energetically. Her innocent appearance made Nazuna smile.

「You don't seem to be from the inquisition— please come in, it's a little... no, it's very messy.」

「What! The 『Insomniac Brilliant General』?」

The old sage became agitated when he learned the identity of their guest.

「This is a rare chance, he came here by himself! Bajin, lock the door! This is the end for you, I will get all the information about the rumoured insomniac —」

「That's impossible. Alright, sit down and calm yourself, Professor. He made a trip here to thank us, so show him your dignity. Bajin, get them some tea.」

Nazuna restrained Anarai who went berserk, got the other researchers to tidy the room and receive the guests. In this group of socially inept researchers, she had always been the most sensible one.

Jean watched with intrigue as the lab turned clean in no time.

「Hah*— I have seen the research rooms of theological researchers, but this place is more lively. There are many apparatuses I have never seen before too. Is this where you conduct 『Science』?」

「Not just here. Any place where we can make observations and unravel mysteries will be a place to study Science.」

Anarai tried to show some dignity as directed by Nazuna and puffed out his thin chest as he said that. Jean walked right up to him and lowered his head without any hesitation.

「Excuse me, I would like to first offer my gratitude — thanks to the Professor's help, we manage to keep civilian casualties to a minimum and accomplish our mission. The military will send you a plague of gratitude in the near future, but let me thank you personally before that.」

「Maybe you didn't need my help at all. The mission was only a success because of your excellent command.」

Anarai wasn't being humble and was merely stating a fact. Thinking that they were having an adult conversation, Kasha kept looking around the room.

「Jean, can I look around here?」

The girl said, spurred by her curiosity. Nazuna answered before Jean could.

「Oh, sorry for boring the child. Please come this way.」

Jean watched as Kasha went straight to Nazuna who was waving her over. With one matter settled, the white-haired officer looked back at the old man and threw out a topic.

「My subordinate was surprised not just by the scholarly knowledge of the Professor, but your military acumen too.」

「This isn't the first time I assisted with the military. After spending enough time with them, I will learn a cursory level of military knowledge even if I didn't want to.」

Anarai didn't seem proud of this and even detested it a little. Realizing this, Jean asked sharply.

「Mum*? ... Pardon me for asking, but Professor, you seem opposed to researching things for military applications?」

In response to this personal question, the old sage answered unreservedly.

「Not really. I'm just tired of researching for effective ways of harming humans for a long time now.」

His sincere and forthright answer troubled Jean who was planning to figure out Anarai's intention through subtle conversations. As he searched for another angle of attack, Anarai continued:

「The military is just one aspect of Science. Focusing just on that will be like staring at a mountain of fruits and only eating the bananas. Am I wrong?」

It was a simple analogy— and his way of expressing his dissatisfaction. Realizing there was no point in probing each other, Jean also changed his tone and answered in a forthright manner.

「War is just one part of the world. I completely agree with you on that.」

「It seems we will get along unexpectedly well.」

Anarai grinned. Feeling the load on his shoulders lightening, Jean smiled too. He could sense a certain quality about Anarai Khan that would put anyone he met for the first time at ease.

「However— doing research requires a lot of funding. And the more turbulent the times, the more likely that other things will be sacrificed to inject more resources into war.」

The old man said with a shrug. Having lived longer than others, he witnessed such things more often.

「Anyway, in order to advance Science in this era, it's inevitable that war will be involved. Military might just be one aspect of Science, but it is an area that will guarantee funding. Throughout history, every era is accompanied by war.」

The old man stated an inevitable conclusion. Jean had a question when he heard that and asked:

「Then... Professor, do you Scientists plan to leech off the military in the future too?」

Miara looked at him with surprise. This was too rude towards an elderly you just met and owed a favour to.

However—Jean felt he had to ask the question right now. The answer wouldn't change even if he waited, so he should just ask clearly right from the start.

Anarai stood up silently and signalled the door to another room with his gaze.

「This way, let me show you our research.」

The two of them were taken to a room with minimal sunlight and the air was cooler. The narrow space was filled with cabinets and they had to move between them.

「So, do you know why people get sick?」

Anarai asked when he reached the deepest part of the room. Miara looked around her uneasily while Jean answered from his knowledge.

「I learned that disease is caused by miasma. Thing like rotting carcass and filth will accumulate in the ground, then miasma that reeks strongly will fester and harm the human body.」

He gave the standard theology answer, but Anarai shook his head.

「That theory is outdated. There isn't enough study on the miasma itself and it misleads people into thinking that the reeking smell is the cause of diseases. People from the Empire and Kioka have the habit of spraying perfume in the rooms of patients, but that's meaningless for a Scientist like me.」

He used scientific experiments to dismiss that theory. Anarai revealed his attitude through his words and actions, which sent a chill down Jean's back. He didn't realize it yet, but that was his excitement towards the unknown realm of Science.

「Diseases are caused by 『Bacteria』.『Bacteria』 is something smaller than a flea or an ant, miniscule creatures that can't be seen with your eyes. We know this world is full of Bacteria, and we want to investigate the effect Bacteria has. Bread turning mouldy, mushrooms growing in dark alleys — all these phenomenon are caused by Bacteria.」

The tiny existence that couldn't be discerned by the naked eye. Just thinking about the world being filled by such things gave Jean the illusion that the density in this space was growing.

「We know there are many types of Bacteria. This is just a theory for now, but what if the different types of disease are caused by different Bacteria? This will open the possibility of different treatment methods, right? Identifying which harmful Bacteria is in the patient's body and expelling them. This technique will create a new form of medical treatment.」

After saying that, Anarai took out a petri dish from the innermost cabinet. At a glance, it had unassuming green mouldy spots.

「Assuming that diseases are caused by Bacteria— the next step will be finding a medicine that can kill all Bacteria. It will be an all-purpose wonder drug.」

The old sage had a classic fearless smile. Realizing what that face meant, Jean was dumbstruck.

「This is that possibility. When this mould increases, many of the Bacteria around it stop reproducing. Do you understand? This isn't a competition between Bacteria, but something inhibiting the growth of other Bacteria. If we can extract it —」

When talking about the potential of their theory, Scientists would always exercise restraint. Anarai was the same and intentionally cut off the topic. He did so to remind himself that his evidence wasn't firm enough to stand on.

「There is still research to be done. We are still groping in the world of Bacteria, so I can't promise that all this won't just be a ridiculous misunderstanding… But even if we approach this with the chance that this is wrong, this research will still be an inspiration.」

The old man suppressed his voice and returned to the topic. Jean was an excellent listener and could predict what he would say next.

「Since it involves the development of the medical field, this is no longer in the realm of war, correct?」

「That's right.」

Seeing Jean leaning towards the direction he was going for made Anarai smile. After looking at the numerous petri dishes around the room, the old man continued.

「The budget for this research came from the Kioka Department of War. Because war and diseases go hand in hand, this isn't entirely

inappropriate. However, our research has far exceed the boundary of wars.」

His tone was full of arrogance again. It was Jean's turn for self-restraint as he tells himself not to get excited over this topic. The old man looked straight at him and said firmly.

「You asked me if we will continue to leech off the military? For the time being, yes. However — I do know of parasites that eat their host before morphing into maturity. I hope we can achieve that.」

Anarai gave a bold and arrogant answer to Jean. As Jean shivered from excitement and caution, the 「Heretic」 Anarai Khan spread his arms and looked up to the ceiling.

「—Science is right here. It will still be here after war is gone.」

「— You should avoid getting too involved with them.」

After finishing the heavy conversation and leaving the research lab, Miara said to the white-haired officer. The impression the old sage left on her was different from that of Jean.

「That old man's thinking is too outlandish. He doesn't have a sense of belonging to the nation, and will resort to anything to advance his Science. He might be an outstanding individual, I don't think he should be given too much responsibilities.」

She wanted to stay away from risky elements. This was one correct way of handling things, but Jean kept thinking about his conversation with that old man.

「... He feels familiar.」

「?」

「He feels familiar. I can feel something similar from that old man that reminds me of that guy who said I'm a slave.」 He confessed painfully because he was admitting his regret all this while.

「I know it's better not to get involved with him. You are right, Miara, but —」

With Kasha who got tired from playing on his back, Jean could feel her every breath. If I can embrace Science with an attitude as innocent as this girl— Jean realized that he was hoping to do so.

「—For some reason, I just can't ignore that old man's existence. 」



Two days after the Insomniac Brilliant General met the old sage for the first time, the Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii invited Jean, Miara and Harrah to the Governmental Residence.

「Pardon my intrusion, Prime Minister Sir— Army Major General Jean Arkinex's group of three reporting as requested.」

Jean was ushered into a wide living room by Ario's wife, which was clearly a cross cultural place. The checker wall drapes were Mamulan style, the large table was Nitagua traditional art. Ario himself was sitting in a wicker chair which was an antique from Bayoshie.

Another room was filled with Yaponiku furniture with floor mats made from vegetation fibre. A place where it was hard to differentiate politics from personal preference.

「This isn't a summon, but an invitation. A personal invitation, so please relax. In any case, pardon me for asking you to come over on your off day.」

「No, it's an honour to be summoned by you, Sir. I will rush here during my own wedding.」

Jean promised from the fur couch opposite Ario. The Prime Minister curled the corners of his lips in a smile.

「That sounds very reliable of you, but that joke doesn't suit you. Do you have such plans?」

「Regrettably, no. I'm married to my work for now.」

「That's fine. I think you are the strongest when you are single.」

Ario sounded really sure, which made Miara frown. Harrah who was seated on the other side of Jean said.

「Prime Minister Sir, do you think having a spouse will make a person weaker?」

「That depends on the person. I'm married, but I don't think I'm weaker than before. However— Maybe that's because I lack humanity, Harrah.」

「What do you mean...」

「It's very simple. When my wife and the nation are placed on opposite end of a scale, I won't even hesitate for a second.」

The representative of the Kioka citizens looked towards the kitchen where his wife was and said openly.

「I told her that right from the start. If she is taken hostage, I will rescue her with the same effort as any other citizens. Treating all citizens equally without any bias — isn't that the requirement for being the head of the government?」

Miara and Harrah didn't know how to react to that logical argument. Ario stuck his tongue out at the two troubled soldiers.

「—That's a lie of course.」

Miara frowned.

「—Hah?」

「It's a lie, a big lie. The citizens will accept it if I treat them equally? That's not possible, and the contrary is true. For the example I gave, people might see me as a heartless man who abandons his wife, and my approval ratings will plummet. Do you

understand? Showing your impartiality to intensely will earn the citizens' ire instead.」

The Prime Minister said with a wry smile. The head of the government used this irony to show his humour.

「The concept of equality doesn't mesh well with humans, since people want preferential treatment. Be they weak or strong, young or old, men or women, those who seek equality are the ones without preferential treatment. Their true goal isn't equality for all. They want all the privileges for themselves.」

With his chin resting on his interlocked fingers, Ario droned on.

「Unfortunately, Kioka's history is too short for the citizens to understand the value of equality for all citizens. Everyone is treating equality as an inferior substitute compared to having privilege. No, this isn't bad, just having this superficial policy of equality is a big improvement. But if they continue to think about equality through this ideological filter, it will be the biggest issue holding the nation back in the future. And that issue is the concept of racial independence.」

Ario's wife returned to the living room at this time and served tea to everyone. The sweet fragrance of lily was said to be the preferred fermented tea of the old Garuma Royals. The metal cups and utensils were from Laos.

「Equality is important, but I'm not going for the pessimistic situation of 『no one can be saved』, but the goal of 『everyone will be saved』. Equality is shown in both situation, but the impression they give is very different, right?」

「Yah*. Which means that if there is danger, you will rescue your wife.」

「Hmm, depending on the circumstances, that might not be possible — as you know, the bloodline of all six nations flows in my

wife's veins. Since I took such a woman as my wife, it will be a problem for me if she and my son can't live happily.」

His wife ignored what her husband said with a calm smile. Jean was always impressed by her calm demeanour. No matter how he diced it, he couldn't see how a normal person could stand the rigor of being Ario Kyakushii's wife.

「Hmm— showing selflessness will have adverse effects? That's some food for thought.」

Jean rose rapidly to his position because of his selflessness, and this philosophy that ran contrary to what he learned made him fall into deep thought. But Ario just shook his head.

「You don't need to worry about it. This logic doesn't work for you, Jean Arkinex.」

Stopped at just the first rung of his ladder of thought, the white-haired officer turned his gaze back to Ario.

「— Meaning?」

「I'm just the head of a government, but you are a hero and a soldier. It's fine for your mentality to be beyond the understanding of the citizens. You don't have to curry favour with the people, and just play the role as the strongest wielder of our forces. If you continue to rake up accomplishment that no one else can achieve, recognition will naturally follow — That's what I have been telling you, right?」

「... Indeed.」

「No need for sleep, rest, or a wife. A patriot who gives his life to Kioka for the prosperity of the nation. Your wish is to carve these words onto your tomb — am I wrong?」

「— You are right, god father.」

Jean nodded with his hand on his chest and closed his eyes.

「I dedicate my life to the everlasting peace of my mother nation Kioka. Since the day that you found me, I have no objections of giving my life to lay the foundation of the future.」

「You are my pride and joy, my son.」

Ario looked at him with narrowed eyes as he sipped at the jade coloured tea.

「It might be a little late to say this, but you did great for the recent civil unrest. Ending the incident without any hostages dying is an example of the equality I mentioned earlier. The Senators were unbearably noisy, so you have been a big help.」

「It's my honour. The results aren't just the achievement of me and my subordinates, but also Professor Anarai Khan who also happen to be present.」

When the topic shifted, Jean immediately mentioned the old sage. Ario's hand froze immediately before he could take a second sip.

「...I never thought I would hear that name from you. Have you met him?」

「Yes. A few days ago, I visited him unofficially. He is an extraordinary man, and he said something weird —」

「Do not meet with him again.」

Ario demanded firmly without giving any room for negotiations.

「I will say this again, do not meet with him. Meeting Anarai Khan won't benefit you in the slightest.」

Jean was at a loss for words at the unexpected response. When Harrah saw this reaction, he said:

「—How intriguing. I have never met the man himself, but I heard the Prime Minister is very supportive of the employment of Professor Anarai Khan. May I know the reason why our general has to keep his distance from the Professor?」

「Anarai Khan and your group are all talents Kioka needs. But there needs to be a proper time and place to use your expertise. There is nothing to gain by placing inventors and military officers together, and might even induce confusion because of the difference in thinking and positions.」

The Prime Minister gave a vague reason that was difficult to refute. Miara couldn't accept it completely and said on reflex:

「Inventor…? Erm, the Professor call himself a Scientist...」

「Same difference. Jean, do you object to that?」

Brushing her aside, Ario turned to the white-haired officer. When those eyes he had been familiar since he was young looked right at him, Jean could only answer one way.

「... No, I have no objections. Since that is your wish — I will follow your instructions and refrain from interacting with him.」

「I'm glad you understand.」

The man nodded with a smile and leaned back on his wicker chair.

「I know it's pointless to ask you to rest. That's why I want to use your rare vacation meaningfully. I just told you that you don't need to make the citizens happy — but this time, I want you to give a speech at an elementary school. Will you do it? This is supposed to be my job, but you are more popular with the kids.」

「Of course, I will be happy to.」

Jean accepted immediately. Since he was agreeable to that, Miara and Harrah couldn't say anything about that.

The meeting ended on a cordial note, and Ario called out to his wife after the three soldiers left.

「Saram, can you get me another cup? Three spoons of sugar.」

「Yes, Hubby.」

She probably expected that request ahead of time and came out of the kitchen with the tea in less than a minute. The cup was changed from the ones served to guests to the Yaponiku traditional teacup without handles. Political expression aside, this was the cup he was most used to.

After a sip of the sweet tea, the man finally sighed in relief.

「—Phew, that made me break out in cold sweat. I was careless because their lines of work don't intersect, but they got in contact without me realizing it. I should reconsider letting that sage roam free.」

This wasn't something he could say to Jean who he publicly treated like his own son.

「But it's lucky we got an early warning though. I can't let a free man ruin the hero that I raised. Don't you agree, Saram?」

She smiled gently without saying a word. Accepting this silence happily, Ario slowly looked up at the ceiling of his house.

「Jean Arkinex doesn't need freedom, he just needs his duty. If he has a mission that he can't accomplish for his entire life — Then he will be a flawless hero. He will be one when he is alive, even more so when he is dead.」

There was a new square building in a corner of Capital Norandot.

Beside that large building was a smaller one that looked just like its subordinate. This is the first sports hall in Kioka's history, built for the physical education of the students.

「— Nice to meet you! Is everyone studying hard?」

The Fourth Norandot Public School. Six hundred children were enrolled in this education facility with a five-year curriculum, and they had a guest today. The Sports Hall could fit in the entire student body and 100 guests. The children brought their own chair in and sat down inside the hall, then focused their gazes on the hero at the lectern.

「......」

Major Miara Gin stood at one of the two entrances into the Sports Hall as she watched the crowds. She was surveying the building to make sure everything was fine both inside and outside. However, the air about her was sharper than usual. Harrah who was also on lookout duty stood before her and poked her between her brows.

「Pay attention to the wrinkles here. It will spoil your pretty face.」

「Mind your own business. I'm too old to be called cute now.」

Miara rebuked him crudely and averted her face. The buffed man scratched the back of his head with an awkward smile.

「I think you will be cute no matter how old you get, especially in front of Jean.」

Sensing that he was teasing her, Miara's eyes turned serious. Harrah raised his hands to sooth her.

「Come on now, don't glare. Even if you try to hide it, you must be thinking about him right now, correct?」

「......」

「Jackpot? So, 『what』 is worrying you?」

Harrah didn't back down at the sight of her unpleasant face and got right into the heart of the matter. His usual violent concern made Miara sigh, and she gave up on her stubbornness.

「... What do you mean?」

「The reason for your worries. Is it the conversation between Jean and the Prime Minister, or his talk with Professor Anarai Khan? You started acting strange after accompanying Jean out on these two occasions, right?」

Ugh, the girl's lips trembled. At a glance, Harrah might seem rough and uncouth, but he wouldn't miss the minute changes in his comrade's emotions.

「... Both.」

「Then you are twice as worried— Sigh, I wasn't there for the visit to Professor Anarai, so I can't comment on that. But I can understand why you are worried about his exchange with the Prime Minister.」

He said as he patted Miara's shoulder.

「Don't be dejected. From what I know, the guys who shout the loudest about being a bachelor for life are always the easiest to get hooked up with a girl.」

「—That's not it!」

Miara glared at Harrah with a blush. She hung her head embarrassedly, then said with a completely different tone.

「... It's just that, from the way the Prime Minister puts it, Jean will never get happiness...」

「Hmm? What, you think Jean is stricken by misfortune right now?」 Harrah asked stiffly, and she shook her head.

「I didn't say that. But I keep feeling that he is working too hard. Even if he doesn't need sleep, it will be fine if he has more leisure… and free time, right? With all that he has accomplished, he should have earned his rest.」

「That's difficult. If Jean is the type to rest if you make him, he wouldn't be a Major General at such a young age. Working is like breathing to him.」

「That's what I thought, but...」

Miara paused here and thought of the scene some days ago.

「... When he spoke to Professor Anarai, Jean made a face I have never seen before.」

「Oh?」

「His eyes were shining and were far more innocent and pure compared to when he looked at us... Like a boy who found

something interesting, with no duty or obligation weighing him down… I never thought Jean can show such a face...」

「I see. So that's what worries you?」

「... I don't know. When I saw Jean like that, I felt uneasy for some reason. What if he changed? What if I disappear from his sight? I keep thinking all that...」

Her voice was trembling. She had been with the white-haired officer for so long— her plans for the future which she had never doubted was wavering in her heart.

「... I hope Jean never changes. But if that is so, then won't it be just like what the Prime Minister said a few days ago? Am I wishing for Jean to not get happiness? When I start thinking about that, I can't stop...」

Miara's eyes under her glasses looked conflicted for a second. Unable to watch this any further, Harrah gently patted her back.

「I understand. Forget about Jean for now, you need a break from that.」

As he thought about how to help his straight-laced colleague, the big soldier tried to say something cheerfully:

「By the way, Professor Anarai sure knows how to coax people. He manage to get Jean to show his true colours the first time they met, I want to meet him too.」 And he meant it too — their conversation ended with a big round of applause from the Sports Hall. Jean responded from the lectern with a wave.

「— The speech is over. Is our escort mission over?」

「Seems that way —」

Miara tried to perk herself up and focus on her mission when she suddenly stopped.

「Hmm? Why are you suddenly quiet?」

She didn't answer immediately. After staring at the back of the rows of chairs in the Sports Hall, she pointed at a spot with her right index finger.

「... Looks like you will get that chance.」

Harrah followed with his gaze and found a white-haired old man in a white coat, who was clapping for Jean with his assistant.

「The children's eyes are shining when they look at you. You are really popular, Insomniac Brilliant General.」

After the children who wanted handshakes left, Anarai and Bajin walked up to the white-haired officer. This was an unexpectedly quick reunion, and Jean felt conflicted because the Prime Minister recently forbade Jean from interacting with the old man.

「... I was surprised when I saw the Professor amongst the crowd. Did you make the trip to listen to my speech?」

「Instead of the speech, I'm here to see you. Making this trip will be quicker than an invitation letter to visit the research lab.」

「I'm surprised too. I never thought the Professor will want to meet a human over his moulds.」

Bajin said with a shrug. Suppressing his glee, the white-haired officer tried to reply with a cool demeanour.

「It's my honour, but I don't think a mere soldier like me can assist with your research. My time will be better served on other endeavours.」

His choice of words that were colder than before made Anarai realize that Jean has his reasons to stay distant, but that wasn't enough to make the sage back off.

「I'm not interested in you as a soldier. I'm interested in Jean Arkinex, the person.」

Anarai approached boldly with his natural fearlessness. Before Jean could speak, the old man seized control of the conversation.

「Let’s chat. Sleep and his Half-brother Death— Have you heard of that before?」

「... No, I haven’t.」

The youth answered honestly. Anarai nodded and explained:

「You can’t see or feel anything, nor move your body with your will. In the sense that you lose control over your body, sleep and death are really similar. There are even theories that say humans die every night and revive the next morning.」

Unable to grasp the intent behind these words, Jean stared with his eyes wide. The old man continued without hesitation:

「Because of this break— no, renewal, humans can advance towards the long future ahead. If you keep staying alive, then the life of a human will be too long. Yesterday and today, today and tomorrow, then the day after tomorrow. By dividing life this way, humans can withstand the massive amount of time before us… that’s what I think. Although this isn’t Scientific at all.」

The old man paused here. His instincts told him that letting the old man control the pace wasn’t good, so Jean rebutted on instinct.

「... Isn’t there a huge difference between sleep and death? Humans will dream when they sleep. And of course, I don’t know if the dead dreams… But to me, dreaming is a part of life.」

Anarai laughed at this assertion.

「I see, you are right. So—Jean Arkinex, do you dream?」

The white-haired officer felt a chill at that question. He felt ashamed by being led down this line of questions so easily and answered the old man with newfound respect.

「... I will occasionally daydream. Although it’s mostly about things that happened in the past.」

「Hmm? —I-I didn’t know.」

Miara beside him was surprised, and Jean shook his head.

「Dreams aren't worth telling others. Well— Professor Anarai, so what if I dream?」

「How interesting. That seems to strengthen my theory.」

With his eyes shining, Anarai said:

「Other than an exception like you, as far as I know, no human can survive without sleeping. I don't think there are any animals like that in the entire world. My speculation is that you manage to process the sleep of a normal person while you are still awake.」 He said passionately as he tapped his head with his index finger.

「The key lies with how the brain works. Contrary to theology, we think that the brain controls thinking. Sleeping is like letting your brain rest. So for your insomniac nature, we can understand the reason from the way you rest.」

Jean touched his head unconsciously. The old sage continued expounding his ideas.

「This is a hypothesis built on top of an hypothesis, but what do you think about compartmenting your brain to take turns resting? Just like having a few people take shifts for guard duty. Maybe part of your brain is sleeping and another part is awake right now.」

「... It's useless, Professor. Unless you cut my head open, you can't verify this hypothesis.」

「Is that so? Even if I can't verify this directly, I can do so indirectly. I already figure out the methods.」

Anarai declared with a bold smile and looked Jean right in the eyes.

「For the next two weeks— if not, one week will work too, can you let us stay with you? I just need you to take a simple test every hour. Depending on the results, we can verify the hypothesis of compartment sleeping. If a part of your brain is resting, that will affect your performance. For example, if the part controlling your

speech function sleeps, your oratory ability will be diminished, same for your calculation function.」

The old man had an extraordinary way of looking at humans. Realizing that, Miara couldn't help interjecting.

「... This is blasphemy. Are you going to divide human thinking by functions — and even our souls?」

「In the world of Science, there are no such things as souls. Hence, we treat all human activity as a body function. Thinking, feeling, eating, procreating and sleeping are all equal.」

Anarai answered without any hesitation. With a sideway glance at his adjutant , Jean squeeze his voice out:

「... It's regrettable, but I will have to refuse. I'm very busy and can't assist you with the experiment, Professor. I will return the favour next time...」

「It's too hasty to reject this immediately. What if you die because of your insomniac lifestyle?」

The old man kept up his offence. The white-haired officer twitched his brow.

「... What do you mean?」

「I mean what I said literally. There are all kinds of illness associated with sleep deprivation, it's too optimistic to think that you alone can avoid that!」

Anarai tried persuading him from another angle. Harrah who was observing silently finally chipped in:

「You are contradicting yourself, Professor Anarai. Didn't you just explain your hypothesis on compartment sleeping?」

「That's just a hypothesis. It's just a conjecture without any evidence, and even if it's true, it won't guarantee the health of Jean Arkinex— By the way, if even if it's true that his brain is taking turns

sleeping… Do you really think such a rough method of operation won't exact any toll?」

Miara and Harrah fell silent at the same time and couldn't refute. Jean's insomniac nature was a symbol of his heroism and questioning that was a taboo. However— the old man before them easily crossed that line and stepped into the forbidden ground.

「Anyway, forget about the experiment for now, it will be wise to let me diagnose you. I'm confident that I am more suited for this task compared to other doctors. If you are busy with your work in the military, all the more reason to understand your body's condition and find out how you should rest?」

Anarai summarized with sharp logic, making it even harder for the trio to refute. Not just that, this raises more questions for Jean. He made up his mind and asked.

「Professor Anarai, what is it about me that made you —」

An explosion of compressed air cut him off.

「Enemy attack! They are here—!」

The shouts of his subordinates echoed out. Jean instantly switched gears and started giving orders.

「Everyone stay alert! Miara, Harrah, don't let the civilians out of the Sports Hall! Gather them in one area and stay low!」

His two comrades immediately took action. There were screaming everywhere in the Sports Hall, and the messengers outside reported the situation.

「Major General, enemy attack! More than 100 militias with non-uniform equipment have broken through the northern school gate! Sergeant Major Kenshi is engaging with a platoon, but they can't hold them for long...!」

「Fight defensively and fall back! Tell Sergeant Major Mita to use this Sports Hall as a defensive fort!」

The soldier returned to the frontlines with clear instructions. Jean watched the battle from over his shoulder and said to the two Scientists beside him:

「Professor Anarai, Assistant Bajin, please return to the hall… I apologize for dragging you into another incident.」

「Don't worry, it happens all the time.」

「Yes, all the time.」 They accepted the situation so readily that it seemed out of place. It was rude to do so in this urgent situation, but Jean couldn't help laughing.

「... The enemy forces are about 130 strong, 70% with Crossbows and 30% with Wind Guns. Most of the Crossbows didn't have Sprites installed. They have the Sports Hall surrounded.」

Miara reported as she observed the outside from the entrance of the Sports Hall. Jean crossed his arms and surveyed the area.

「On the other hand, we only have one Wind Gun platoon of 40 men as escorts... We are outnumbered.」

The children and civilians who got dragged into this abnormal situation were gathered in the middle of the hall, clinging to each other fearfully. Harrah looked outside after seeing their reaction and grunted.

「From the aura the militia is giving off, are they from the Kingdom Revival Faction again? They are actually attacking an elementary school, have they finally gone insane?」

「Hard to say, I think they have an ulterior motive.」

The old man suddenly poked his head in from the side of his huge body. Jean rested his palm on his forehead troublingly.

「...Mum*, Professor. You are a civilian too, please stay with the children...」

「Bajin is already there. He is great with kids and should ease some of their tension.」

The answer that deviated from the question gave the white-haired officer the feeling the conversation was going around in circles — he was certain that this old man didn't have the humility of accepting protection all this time.

「What's more important is the people outside. I will be blunt, their target is you, right?」

「... Considering the recent events, that is very possible.」

Jean didn't try to hide anything and accepted that possibility before asking.

「If that's true, then the enemy's numbers seem suspicious. The criminals involved with the last incident have all been arrested. If they have so much manpower in reserve, why didn't they commit them right from the start?」

「Either someone is trying to take advantage of that conflict — or this group is their insurance. A back up plan if their last plan fails.」

The youth who deduced the same thing nodded, but Anarai continued:

「However— that aside, such incidents are happening too frequently. Instead of the Extremist groups suddenly going berserk, I think an agent from the Empire is inciting them. This is no surprise since Kioka incited many civil unrest —」

「—Professor! Please watch your words. There are civilians here!」

Jean stopped him with a firm tone and Anarai also realized he went too far.

「Oh, sorry. That's how I am, after all these years, not holding my tongue is still a flaw I can't improve. I even feel speechless about myself.」

Gunshots rang out while he was speaking with self-mockery, and there was a sound of someone falling onto the ground. Anarai looked at the gunners at the entrance with an impressed face.

「Back to topic, your subordinates are good. Seeing the shots hitting the guys in front will make those behind hesitate. The speedy response has a great effect in stifling the enemy's morale.」

On the other hand, Miara who was wary of the situation outside said:

「The army will send reinforcements shortly. We just need to hang on until then...」

「That won't work.」 「That won't work.」

The voices of the white-haired officer and old sage overlap. Jean continued speaking to Miara who turned back with her eyes wide open.

「Since they are taking action in the middle of the capital, they must be aware of the time constraint for their operation. They probably plan to capture the Sports Hall before reinforcement arrives, then use the children and me as hostages. This impasse won't last too long. Once they resolved themselves, they will charged in at the risk of suffering losses.」

「Yes. Once it turns into a chaotic battle indoors, we won't be able to hold on with the numbers we have.」 Anarai looked around the Sports Hall and concluded calmly. Jean nodded readily.

「The children will get dragged in too. We must avoid that at all cost.」 The white-haired officer declared firmly and thought with his hand on his chin for a moment.

「—Mum*, let's think about this from another perspective. Since a defensive battle is impossible, we will be forced to a dead end if we just use the Sports Hall as a defensive fort. We have to forcefully change our strategy from defence to offense.」

「Oh, specifically speaking?」

The old sage urged him to continue with shining eyes. Jean answered by giving his instructions.

「Harrah, change the troop deployment. Send two sections to the stairway on the left and right, and close the curtains. Do it slowly to avoid enemy detection.」

「Understood. Take aim from the windows, right.」

「That's right, do that when the enemy is still outside.」

Harrah in charge of the platoon acted and Jean turned to his female adjutant.

「Miara, let the civilians hide elsewhere. If they squeeze, the stage, storerooms beside and under the stage should be enough for all of them. The youngest children will hide deeper in, while the adults will be the last ones. Get them to carry the chairs before they hide.」

「Yes Sir!」

She ran off immediately, leaving Jean who spoke to Anarai.

「With a change of perspective, this Sports Hall isn't just a building, but a trap to take out the enemy. We don't have to endure the enemy's attack and will take the initiative to attack them. We will act with this idea in mind now.」

「—I see, I get the gist of your idea.」

The old man who understood the plan without further explanation looked at the Sports Hall again.

「And now, the issue will be time. We have to make the adequate arrangements before they charge in. There are so many civilians, will we make it in time?」

「We have to, Professor. Please help me too.」

「I don’t mind, but—」 Before Anarai could finish, a petite figure appeared by their feet.

「—Jean! What’s going on, is it the Revival Factionists again!?」

After rushing right up to the white-haired officer, Kasha Masukusu asked angrily. A woman who seemed to be her mother came quickly. Kasha probably wanted to listen to this talk, and Jean was aware of them during the speech too.

「Kasha... you can’t stay here. Go with the rest of the children and —」

「No! I want to fight too!」

Kasha declared as if that were obvious and Anarai clapped.

「Great. Jean, why don’t you get her to help?」

「Professor? What are you —」

「I mean helpers. The younger children aside, the older ones are quite strong, right?」

The old man went around to the back of the girl and pat her shoulder with a smile.

「This girl will be the one who makes the civilians take action. They will be hesitant if the soldiers ask them to help, but if this little girl lead the way, the adults will have to move.」

「But I can’t agree to this. We should prioritize the evacuation of the children.」

「Forget about evacuation, everyone will be in danger if your plan doesn't work, no one will have any priorities. Be it children, dogs or cats, anyone who can work has to.」

Anarai said as he rolled up his sleeves. Jean was still hesitant when Kasha’s voice came from below.

「I will work hard! Hey～Jean, what are we doing? What should I do?」

The girl looked at the white-haired officer with serious eyes, just like the first time they met. Her courage gave him the last nudge he needed.

「... Thank you, Kasha. Please assist me. First— can you move this chair to the place I marked out?」 「Yes! Got it!」

Kasha nodded and quickly ran off. Everyone looked at her petite body lifting a chair, curious about what's going on. Using this chance, Jean raised his voice and said.

「— To all the adults and upper elementary students! I hope you can help to move the chairs just like she is doing! We will do our best, but I will need your help to ride out this crisis! Let's work together to overcome the enemy!」

The children were in an uproar. The white-haired officer used his innate charm to encourage the children who were confused and uneasy.

「Don't worry! I swear on the name of Kioka and the 『Insomniac Brilliant General』 that we will prevail! Just follow my instructions and I won't let anyone of you be harmed! Let's work together to seize victory!」

Jean said cheerfully and led the way in the work. When the soldiers were hesitant, the commander would need to lead by example. He and Kasha put this principle into practice.

「Let's get started then! Show the baddies the results of your efforts!」

「Hey, stop dallying! The orders to charge are already given!」

「T-That's true...! But all the guys who ran in front got shot down!」

A militia said timidly when his comrade behind urged him to go forth. This unsightly scene made the commander shake his head.

「That's why we must charge at the same time! The situation will only get worse if we are stalled here! If the army arrives before we can control the Sports Hall, it will be over for real!」

The militia who were reminded of the time limit turned pale. Before they grew hesitant from fear again, the commander pointed at them to fan the flames.

「Listen up, resolve yourself to charge! Do it at the same time on my command! This is my final order! I will execute anyone who doesn't move!」

He fired at the ground after saying that. This became the final push to his subordinates. The determined militia charged out of cover simultaneously.

「「「「「W-Waaarrrghhh!」」」」」

The masses charge towards the Sports Hall. The sound of air explosion overlapped, and a few of them got hit and keeled over.

「Don't stop!」「Charge, charge～!」

There were a number of casualties, but the leading elements of the militia still made it to the entrance of the Sports Hall. No one had the courage to charge in, so they leaned against the wall and peeked inside.

「W-We made it!」「Charge in! Go go go!」

They moved again after the rest caught up and finally charged into the building. A militia shouted as he stepped in:

「Nobody moves! We are warriors of the Garuma's Kingdom Revival Faction— That's weird?」

What they saw— wasn't a group of terrified children, but pitch darkness. The Sports Hall was darker than they expected with all the curtains closed.

「There's no one here.」

「That's impossible! There should be more than 600 children here!」

「Well, it's too dark to see clearly… Hey! Don't push! Stop squeezing!」

Pushed by their comrades from behind, they had to move forth into the darkness. This would be impossible in a regular army, but the militia who was ready for a blitz battle in daytime didn't bring the Sprites needed for a melee combat. The lack of a High Beam light made it hard for them to see and the militia in front bump their knees against the chairs.

「Damn it! It's hard to walk with the chairs… Stop hiding you brats! You will regret it if you don't come out! If you give us any trouble, you will suffer like the dogs in the army —」

Before he could finish, High Beam light from around them lit them up.

「Shyaa—!」 「Guaahh!」 「Hyaa!」

A hail of bullets rained down without any command being given. The militia who got attacked turned pale.

「Damn it! It's a trap! Return fire, aim for the lights!」

「What the hell! The army will avoid harming the civilians, so it should be safe once we get in!」

「This is different from what you told us! Where are the brats, damn it!」

Those who cursed and tried taking cover behind the chairs, people who attempted to flee behind their comrades… These reckless actions made the already low standard organization lose control.

「Hey, don't push! I'm facing the muzzles there!」

「Even if you say that, our comrades are squeezing in from behind…! Don't push, don't push～!」

「What are the guys in front doing!? We are all cramped up here, spread out!」

「The chair is blocking the way and making it hard to move! If you want to complain, then help move — Uwah!」

The militia who thought he was safe behind a chair fell from a shot to the back of his head. The militia started panicking more as their comrades died one after another.

「— Carry on firing. The enemy has stopped their advance, use this chance to pick them off.」

Looking down at the chaotic enemy from right under the window, Harrah gave his orders. They weren't shooting from the front, back or sides, but diagonally from above. The High Beam light below also served as a misdirection, Luminous Sprites borrowed from the civilians.

「They are still firing at the High Beam lights. They still haven't grasp the layout of the Sports Hall or that the shots are coming from above.」

「The situation is different from their expectations and they can't handle it. They are just a rag tag mob of amateurs after all!」

Sergeant Major Mita grunted and squeezed her trigger. On the opposite side of this group, Miara's men were also attacking in the same way. The militia who were expecting to attack in broad daylight got exposed from a pincer attack ambush and were dying one by one.

「—Good. Just as planned.」

On the stage to the north where the drapes were drawn, a pair of eyes were observing the scene that was pitiful to the point of being amusing. Protecting tens of civilians behind him, Jean, six soldiers and Anarai were standing by here.

「Hiding the civilians on the stage and storage room behind to draw in the enemy, then use the Wind Gunners deployed at the window stills to fire on them— Splendid. This is the best tactic that I can think of.」

「This is nothing, just a trick I built based on the assumption that the standards of the militia is low.」

The white-haired officer answered quietly and observed the battle through narrowed eyes. The soldiers infiltrating the Sports Hall from the two entrances were moving southwards away from the stage for some reasons.

「And your plan seems to be working, Professor. Most of them are moving away from us. Guiding them with the use of obstacles… I remember that is how you phrased it.」

「That's correct. If they think that the chairs are blocking their way, they won't hesitate in pushing them aside. But humans are creatures of habit, if they find a gap in the obstacle, they can't help running towards it. Those guys are no different, and will move towards the place with less chairs, onto the route we set for them. And the result is them heading directly away from us.」

Anarai said with a bold smile. This is the result of a set up done with the help of the children. Jean observed the results of this misdirection before him and nodded.

「The preparation rooms are on both sides of the stage, and the storage space is directly beneath us. Thanks to the misdirection, we have greatly lessened the chance of the civilians getting harmed in the battle.」

「That's right. But this isn't safe enough, there will always be outliers in a group — like that guy.」 In the direction of the old man's gaze, a militia broke away from his group to avoid getting shot, stumbling through the chairs towards the direction of the

stage. Jean aimed for his belly and squeezed the trigger of his Crossbow. The militia squatted down with a scream.

「We are here to take out the enemy they missed… However...」

Jean reloaded carefully, making sure not to make any noise. He could hear the occasional sobbing from the children behind him.

「— Hey, wait. I hear something.」

The militia who heard the same also informed the comrade before him.

「... It came from behind. The crying of a child.」

「In the opposite direction of the light? ...Hey, did they trick us!?」

Those with keen senses grasped the situation and relayed the information to their comrades.

「Turn back! The brats aren't there, they are in the opposite direction!」

「What?」 「Are you kidding me...!」 「Do you know how many guys we lost!?」

The mob standing shoulder to shoulder in the cramped hall turned around. Harrah's group who had a bird eye's view could clearly see the change in their movement. In just about ten seconds, the shots from above rained down on the militia heading towards the stage.

「Woaaahhh! Their salvo is as tight as the rain...!」

「Damn it! They are aware that we noticed!」

「Move the chairs! Charge all the way to the other end —!」

The militia desperately shifted the chairs away as they moved towards the stage. Jean accepted this result calmly as if he expected it.

「... As I thought it comes to this. This can't be helped, asking the lower elementary students to stay quiet the whole time is impossible.」

The sobbing from behind him was now a wail. Jean wasn't anxious or frustrated. He just felt useless for failing to put the people he was supposed to protect at ease. His subordinates beside him all affixed bayonets to their Crossbows.

「I will engage the enemy attacking here. Professor, please fall back this time.」

「If necessary, it will come down to melee combat, huh? Is the Insomniac Brilliant General proficient with sword duelling?」

「I have never lost to any of my classmates in the military academy. The enemy has taken huge losses from the continuous fire. However — my proficiency with the sword aside, this is my fate.」

The white-haired officer said decisively with a smile. In contrast, Anarai frowned after hearing that.

「Fate, huh…? I can't agree to that. That's not Scientific.」

「Just like souls? But I don't doubt the existence of fate though.」

Jean Arkinex stated his belief without hesitation. He could see the daydream he kept seeing in his mind. He would never forget the scene that created him as a person.

「I was the only one who got saved in that hell — If not fate, then what can that be?」

He muttered with a determined expression. Taking one step towards the edge of the stage, he leapt into battle.

「—Attack!」

And the fight broke out. Jean shot a charging enemy with a bolt, and a subordinate nearby ended him rightly with a bayonet. After the blade was retracted, blood dripped from it.

「Phew...!」

Two soldiers charged in. Jean engaged one of them, lowering his body to stab the enemy's chest. He didn't back off when the blood splattered him, and the white-haired officer continued to direct his men.

「Don't let any of them through! Protect the children, we are the last line of defence!」

He gave the order to defend to the last without any hesitation. One militia aimed for the gap in the defences and charged the stage like a boar.

「Waarrrgghh!」

「—! You shall not pass!」

Judging that none of his subordinates would make it in time, Jean dropped his Crossbow and his partner on it and tackled the enemy readily. The militia wrestled him down and rode on top of Jean, ready to stab Jean with his bayonet.

「Let go, damn you! Die! Die!」

He pushed the Crossbow down with all his might. Jean grabbed the Crossbow and pushed back, but he couldn't exert enough force in that posture, so the blade hovered near his throat.

「...! ... You want to kill me that badly, so called warrior of the Kingdom Revival Faction?」

「That's right, die! Who cares about racial equality!? This is our country!」

Jean smiled fearlessly at his naked true feelings.

「I'm sure of it now after hearing that— You can't kill me, destiny is not on your side!」

After saying that, Jean pushed back with twice the strength as before. The enemy stumbled back and felt a chill on his back.

「—Huh—」

With a flash, the militia who turned back was decapitated. His head rolled on the ground with a confused face as he embraced death.

「Jean, are you alright!」

With a short sword in hand, Miara Gin who rescued her master rushed to his side. Jean stood up immediately to indicate that he was fine.

「Thanks, Miara. I feel safe with you around!」

「I will protect you with my life. Get behind me!」

She had a different face than usual, a face of a warrior with both hands on her short sword. Jean picked up his Crossbow, ready to fight to the bitter end, but noticed that the situation had changed.

「Look, Miara— the enemy is withdrawing.」

「— The guys behind are turning back. Did they got spooked by the heavy casualties their comrade took?」

Harrah could see from his elevated vantage point that the enemy was fleeing out of the two Sports Hall exits. Sergeant Major Mita who was still shooting beside him announced confidently.

「The match has been decided! As expected, our boss is invincible!」

Harrah nodded lightly. At that moment, through the gap of the heavy window curtain, he saw the familiar sight of uniforms appearing at the other end of the school gate.

「The army is here. Leave the routed enemy to our allies, we will sweep the hall for any remnants.」

The buff man gave an order to end the battle. And as he predicted, what followed couldn't even be called a fight as they cleaned up the enemy.

「Jean, we did it! We beat them off again!」

Right after she climbed out of the storage space under the stage, the girl immediately sought out the white-haired officer and sprinted to him.

The surviving militia admitted defeat and surrendered. After they were arrested and taken away by the army, the cheers of the liberated civilians filled the Sports Hall.

「You worked hard too, Kasha. Are you hurt?」

「I'm fine! Listen, there's a kid who is crying, and I keep holding his hand!」

Kasha reported proudly and Jean squatted down to his eye level with a smile and nod. Anarai who was watching their interaction nodded repeatedly.

「Looks like things are settled now. The civilians are unharmed, and the troops are only lightly wounded. A great result.」

At the sound of his voice, the white-haired officer turned towards the old man.

「This is thanks to your help, Professor... Before I can repay you the favour, I owe you another one.」 Anarai ranted to the youth who was bowing to thank him.

「Well then, I will collect on this debt immediately. Can you let me investigate your body? I will follow you around, it won't be affect your work too much.」

The old sage leaned forth and repeated his earlier proposal. Remembering Ario's request for him to not meet this person, Jean considered for a while — and smiled with a face of resignation.

「... You helped me twice, so it will be hard for me to turn you down.」

He answered as he apologized to his godfather in his heart — He had to admit that this weird Scientist's action that defied common sense attracted him.

「... But Professor, will that really be fine? It will be hard for an old man to keep up with my schedule.」

「Don't look down on me, boy. Who do you think I am? Some call me a 『Heretic』, and I evaded the inquisition of the god for fifty years with my quick feet!」

Anarai slapped on his thigh as he said that. Jean was sure that he would be associating with this old man for a long time.

Since the first time they chatted, he had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to ignore this person's existence. Jean sensed through the feeling of glee that his prediction turned true.

Chapter 3

Empress of Destruction

Normally, a battlefield wouldn’t appear out of nowhere. A place that wasn’t a battlefield would turn into one.

Which was why people would make the convenience for war operations their top priority, preparing the places that had a high chance of turning into a warzone — for example, Infrastructure like cities.

Fortress City Garurujan was one such example. That was an old city in the Katjvarna Empire which was second only to Imperial Capital Banhataal in terms of sturdiness. Its defensive value had been tried and tested repeatedly since the warring era. Aside from the thick walls around the city, it also had the unique structure of a gradual elevation towards the centre, giving the defenders the advantage of the high ground. It’s reputation as an impregnable fortress was growing with each day.

「I never thought that I would experience the sturdiness of this city in such a manner...」

The pudgy youth officer moved his telescope away and muttered with a sigh.

The impregnable fortress wasn’t protecting him and his comrades but stood as a threat before him.

「— Major Tetzirich, the scouts have completed their reconnaissance.」

His subordinate behind him reported. Before listening to the contents, the weirdness of the title 「Major Tetzirich」 made him frown. He was just 21 years old, so it was strange for him to be a Major.

「The material and height of the walls are solid, and the forces deployed to guard the wall are adequate, we didn't find any major weakness in these two areas. There are signs of deterioration on the western wall, but it is hard to tell if it can serve any meaningful tactical purpose —」

「... I see. Sigh, I already expected that...」

He turned around with a soft grunt. With the stern eyes of his older subordinates watching him, Imperial Army Major Matthew Tetzirich walked towards the large tent where the headquarters were.



「Ohh—? Why, why did they do that?」

On the other hand, at the top floor of Fortress City Garurujan. The fifth floor had a special mansion overlooking the entire city, and an officer hugged a woman with one arm and said cheerfully:

「The country is sending such a large army to the puny challenge sent out by little old me. Look, Niam. The city is surrounded, what a grand view.」

「Given your prowess, this level of wariness is only natural, Generalissimo Naian Mitokazuruku.」

The woman in his arms leaned onto his chest and flattered him in a seductive tone. Her actions were as practiced as a prostitute, even the plain uniform on her looked seductive.

「I didn't hear you clearly. Say that again, Niam.」

「I say again. It is only natural that the Imperial officers are stricken with fear, since they are facing the peerless military genius, Generalissimo Naian Mitokazuruku.」

The woman named Niam whispered sweet nothing into his ear. The handsome man with well-defined features — Naian Mitokazuruku repeated himself happily when he heard that.

「How pleasing. Once more, Niam.」

「I repeat. The strongest and smartest man in history, with his intelligence bordering on the realm of the gods and the personification of martial arts, Generalissimo Naian Mitokazuruku. The Imperial officers will be stomped under your feet like weed as you march towards greatness.」

The one saying this had issues, but so did the person who believed her in the first place. Draining every drop of this amusingly over sweetened compliment, 「Generalissimo」 Mitokazuruku laughed out loud.

「......」

Another woman watched the two of them from some distance away. Her face looked nonchalant, but the hands crossed behind her back were clenched so hard that it hurt. She cast a hateful gaze at the hugging couple, especially towards the woman.

「Fuhahaha!— Yes, it's time to play the card I have been holding. 」

When his laughter was at its loudest, Mitokazuruku suddenly regained his composure and looked down. The unnaturally quick change of attitude was one of his self alarm systems to stop himself from being led by the nose.

「The Empire doesn't have the capability to deploy an army of this scale here for long. If Kioka discover this long campaign, they will invade for real this time.」

Unlike the exaggerated words earlier, their strategy for the time being would be complete defence. The Imperial army had laid siege to Mitokazuruku's provincial forces, and there was no way he could stomp on them like weeds.

「...It is as you say, the Imperial army hopes for a short decisive campaign. Conversely, our strategy is stubborn defence of the fort for the long term. We have the advantage in both terrain and time.」

The woman standing by at the side interjected as if she couldn't stay silent anymore. Niam's face was obviously filled with displeasure, and Mitokazuruku turned to that woman unhappily.

「That's right, Major Metrache. Since they have no chance of winning through force, they will be forced to the negotiations table soon. That means they will implicitly recognize my rule, and this province will become my Kingdom.」

The woman named Metrache nodded. Mitokazuruku looked at the army below him with passionate eyes and spread his arms excitedly.

「With the guardians of the Emperor, the Igsem, suffering huge losses, the power foundation of the nation had been badly shaken. This is the turning point in history — How exciting, Niam. We, 『old』 famous houses before the warring era, will rise and make history again!」



「— That man is probably saying things like that agitatedly.」

Same time, different place. In the base camp of the Imperial army surrounding Garurujan, officers of Field-grade rank and above had gathered in a tent for a war conference.

「Colonel Naian Mitokazuruku? There's no need to explain that he is the leader of the Hawkish faction of the old warring era houses — I always thought that he would be the first one to revolt in such a situation, and he didn't betray my expectations.」

A soldier with the epaulette of a Lieutenant Colonel said with a sigh. The officers beside him nodded in agreement.

「He calls himself Generalissimo now. He is good at talking big and boasting, so his troops' morale is high.」

「That guy has always been the sort to use exaggerated actions to gain popularity. Not only did he coerce his subordinates, he also got the Garurujan citizens on his side with his empty promises.」

There were several officers who knew Mitokazuruku from the academy, and this was the impression they had of him as a whole. There was more than sufficient intel on the enemy commander's personality, the agenda naturally shifted in a different direction.

「The entire fortress city had revolted. In any case, that is the current situation.」

「If we leave this be, the entire province will revolt. We have put down this rebellion soon.」

「I understand, but the question is, how?」 When they discussed the ways to attack the fortress, the young man at the end of the table said.

「— No, we have to determine how long we have. We need to know our time limit.」

The surprised officers looked at the person speaking. The slightly plump youth with the epaulette of a Major, Major Matthew Tetzirich, continued with an annoyed face.

「Laying siege on a fortress will be a battle of attrition. If we attack Garurujan normally, it will take several months, maybe years. And we can't spare the effort to fight like that.」

After emphasizing that, the jade-eyed soldier sitting quietly diagonally across him nodded silently.

「... Instead of discussing without boundaries, it will be faster to figure out the strategies that are feasible based on the time limit we have. This will rule out almost all the orthodox strategies.」

The young officer who was around Matthew's age added monotonously and didn't say anything more. He— Lieutenant Colonel Torway Remeon, had grown much quieter over the last two years.

「In conclusion, the only methods left is to give up on resolving the issue through force, and use more diplomatic methods like negotiations.」

Matthew made up his mind to swiftly state the answer. After experiencing many war conferences, he was thick skinned enough to do that now.

When silence loomed over the table, quiet laughter came from the dim spot at the head of the table.

「So you two are volunteering to play the role of the bad guy, huh, Major Matthew, Lieutenant Colonel Torway.」

The girl's voice had an unexplainable sense of authority which made all the officers present shiver. Everyone looked towards the darkness at the deep end of the tent.

「It was obvious that this conference will lead to this conclusion. Almost everyone knows that, but refused to say it —ー your hearts are refusing to give up on attacking in the face of this impregnable fortress.」

Her silhouette melted into the darkness as she continued speaking. Only her lips that looked like a terrible smile were occasionally visible from the darkness.

「To save your pride as soldiers, you choose to continue discussing as a formality. What a roundabout way of doing things. It will just give you a soft landing on the same conclusion.」

Her laughter stopped here. A silence as heavy as lead rested on the shoulders of the officers.

「You are wasting my time, imbeciles.」

The admonishment by their Empress was like a blow to their spine. Cold sweat drenched their foreheads and their lips trembled out of regret and fear.

「Desperately discussing something that is impossible to fudge things over, you think you can fool me with that?」

The humiliating voice pierced everyone's chest. No one refuted this, not just due to her status, but because she was right on mark. And out of fear.

「I don't want to see a clown show. What's possible is possible, what's not possible is not, lay out everything openly to me. Do away with the ceremonious discussion. Not just with routine war conferences— I don't want to waste any time because of your pride. Not even one second.」

Her words, no, her stern warning stabbed deep into the hearts of all the officers present. After opening with a murderous speech, she personally chaired the discussion.

「Well then, Major Matthew. You refuse to be an imbecile, so what do you want to tell me?」

The pudgy youth who was named took deep breaths to deal with the pressure, then braced himself to speak.

「... Withdraw and leave the rebellion alone for now. We can aim to make the enemy crumble from within instead of attacking from outside.」 「Continue.」

「When we withdraw, we will confiscate the resources from the nearby villages that they might get resupplies from, set up a roadblock on the road to restrict merchants from passing through. We don't have to do anything and Garurujan will slowly dry up.」

He used his oratory skills he practiced over two years and thought about the black-hair youth, trying to overlap him onto himself. Matthew desperately formed his words.

After understanding the entirety of his proposal, a response came from the dark end of the tent.

「Cut off supplies and isolate it? It's a reliable plan for a siege, but removing the crucial encirclement will work against that. No matter how much resources we confiscate from the villages or control road traffic, there will always be people who will send in supplies through the gaps. Most importantly — even if this all goes to plan, how long will we need to wait before the massive resources inside Garurujan are all used up?」

The pudgy youth paused and refuted this expected counterpoint at the right moment.

「For the plan I laid out just now, we will get soldiers disguised as the rebel forces —Colonel Mitokazuruku's subordinates, to carry it out.」

The smile of the girl in the darkness deepened.

「— Oh?」

「Make the citizens think that the confiscated resources have been sent to Garurujan. If we keep this up, complaints from the provincial citizens will reach the ears of Colonel Mitokazuruku. He instigated the city to rebel, yet he takes their food and money away. There's no way the citizens can accept that. We can use the 『Supporting Generalissimo Mitokazuruku's war of justice』 as the reason to confiscate their resources, but the soldiers will need to put on an act though.」

I'm summarizing it quite well, Matthew thought and continued:

「Anyway, we will make him lose the support of the provincial residents. For Mitokazuruku's army that has been operating for a long time in this province, this is a problem as serious as starving.

The effects will soon spread to the Garurujan city, the soldiers and citizens must have friends outside the city. Once they learn that their actions are causing their friends to starve, they won't be happy about the current situation. They will snap out of their fervour and the group will quickly lose cohesion. There's no need to wait until their supplies run out.」

Matthew explained the good things about his plan, listing out the reasoning and results succinctly. It would be better for him to address the problems before someone pointed them out — paying attention to the order of his speech, he carefully delivered it.

「We will need to take multiple steps… but compared to a direct assault on the fortress, this plan will need less manpower and cost. So I recommend this plan.」

「... I concur with Major Matthew's proposal.」

Torway's support became the conclusion of the report. With no regard for the officers in deep thought, an impressed tone came from the dark end of the table.

「A proposal based on the fact that the support of the provincial citizens is the foundation of the enemy's army? I see, that's so like you. As expected of a man who grew up watching your father run a regiment.」

The slightly plump youth gulped. He had braced himself for the Empress' stern side.

「But it is not without its flaws. Your plan underestimates the risk of leaving the rebellion alone for so long.」

「...... That's...」

He couldn't refute that. He didn't address the condition of crushing the revolt quickly and was clearly a problem.

「It will be fine if the revolt is limited to this province. But what if this set off a chain of rebellion with their other regiments? The rebel

forces will immediately break through the roadblocks and set up an even stronger supply line between two provinces. Your plan for a long campaign will then fall apart.』

Matthew wanted to speak after thinking deeply, then quickly shut his mouth. They could apply political pressure to the neighbouring provinces to avoid this problem — He was about to say that when he realized that wasn't the main point.

"Suppressing this revolt quickly is the best way to exert pressure to all of the Empire's territories." The Empress had made up her mind to do so, which was why she graced the frontlines personally.



「You stopped yourself from rebutting for the sake of rebutting, Major Matthew. So you really are no fool.」

The girl in the dark smiled as she offered a compliment, which was much rarer than her admonishments.

「Stop staying quiet with a pained expression, there's nothing wrong with choosing to waver people's hearts instead of capturing the fortress. Let's continue the discussion. With that condition in mind, what methods should we use, and which group of people should we target?」

After acknowledging the parts she liked about Matthew's proposal, the conference started again. The pudgy youth who had control of the discussion lost it to her after a few words.

「With Colonel Mitokazuruku at the centre of a circle, put the people related to the revolt inside, with those who are the most eager closer to the middle.」

The faces of the officers in deep thoughts turned serious. To redeem their reputation, they were serious about this.

「Those further from the centre are less enthusiastic about the revolt, and it will be easier to persuade them away from Mitokazuruku's cause. However, those closer to the centre will be more affected by him too. With this contradiction in mind — where should we target?」

She intentionally explained slowly— and the officers present all raised their hands.

「... The first thing that comes to mind is convincing the citizens. Colonel Mitokazuruku coaxes them to join his cause, but they probably aren't too invested in it. Since this is a dispute between the Imperial armies, they will support the side closer to them, but won't be too caught up in victory — That's how the people of the Empire are. Be it good or bad, they will believe that we will protect them.」

「It will be easy to make them waver then. Just crush their naïve delusion.」

She readily accepted this opinion she deemed to be passable. Matthew curled his lips bitterly.

「It's possible to target the citizens and make them betray the city, but we will need a plan to shake up the core. We don't have to devise a grand scheme against a large group, just target one person — Is there a suitable target by Colonel Mitokazuruku's side?」

The girl in the dark opened her eyes wide, her golden pupils sweeping across the group at the table. Before disappointment appeared in her eyes, an officer found the answer after searching his memories.

「— He has a concubine.」 「Concubine?」

「Y-Yes, that's what we call her. There are two types of adjutant he will appoint to assist him. The first are strategic talents that can advise him on tactics and strategies. The other is — how do I put this...」

「It's obvious at this point. The concubine plays the role of a mistress, right?」

She said it out while the other party was still hesitating, and that officer confirmed it.

「... Hence, the clashes between the adjutants have never stopped before. The strategist who reached her position by her own merits, and the concubine who used her charms and beauty to earn her place, the two adjutants detest each other. They yearn for a monopoly over their commander's attention, and the affairs of the heart played a part too.」

「I see— Mitokazuruku has some interesting hobbies.」

Her jeer and laughter shook the darkness. The officers' eyes were filled with fear when they heard her. They knew their Empress' laughter would always lead to a certain result.

「Good, we know who the target is. Next is the specific plan — In any case, we will need people to work inside the city. Is there any way to send our agents into Garurujan?」

「Depending on the means, it's doable. Pardon me, but Your majesty —」

Matthew spoke, ready for any rebuke. However, the courage he mustered was suppressed immediately.

「You don't have to say anything more, Major Matthew. You realized it too, correct? By using a slightly devious method, it's possible to capture the city swiftly.」

「Your Majesty, that's...!」

That method was taboo. The pudgy youth wanted to say it out loud, but it got caught in his throat. Because he couldn't see a shred of hesitation in her golden eyes.

「Get on with it then. Don't worry, your Empress has already deviated from the righteous path — At the very beginning, when I took my first step.」

「— How shocking. Look, we are completely surrounded.」



This was the third level of the Garurujan city, which had a park, fountain and public facilities. The citizens who live in the lower levels gathered spontaneously here to look out of the city walls.

「That's the army from Central? Will we be fine? Lord Mitokazuruku did say it will be alright...」

「Don’t worry～ there have been several civil wars so far and they always left us alone. It will be the same this time.」

A young couple was chatting. Even though the city was surrounded by a large army and they knew their opponent was the national army, the Imperial citizens merely treated this as some kind of rare event.

「Even if a battle broke out, we won’t get dragged in. Hey, take a look too. I even borrowed a telescope from my neighbour to enjoy the sights from the walls.」

「You are really...」

The girl beside him said exasperatedly. Right after that, the man looking through the telescope said again:

「...Oh? There’s a unit moving pass the encirclement and coming towards us.」

「Huh? Where?」

「Look, that way. What are they trying to do?」

The man pointed with his empty left hand as he observed through the telescope. He frowned after getting a clear picture.

「... What’s that? They are dragging some strange fellows with them.」

The Imperial soldiers bringing strange people were in clear sight now. The man tried to make out the true nature of the small figures in the distance, and he clicked his tongue as the telescope wasn’t strong enough.

「Their hands are chained and there are ropes around their waist... and a bag covering their heads? How unsettling, it’s like the parading of criminals.」

「Let me see.」

The girl grew concerned and urged him to hand over his telescope. After a brief scuffle, she snatched the telescope and witnessed the problematic scene.

「Over there, right? They are really close to the outer walls. The strange people are lined up —?」

As she looked on, the soldiers armed with Wind Guns and Crossbows affixed with bayonets walked forth to the strange people who had their arms tied — what happened next caused the telescope to fall from the girl's hands.

「— Stab them.」



「Gyaah—!」 「Waahh!」 「Ugghhh!」

The death throes spread far and wide like a choir. Some of the soldiers turned their heads away, and some were blinking tears away.

「... It's over, Platoon Leader...」 「...Ughh.」

One of the blood-stained men reported. The corpses before him made it clear that they had crossed the line, but the Platoon Leader still carried out his duty.

「— By decree of Her Majesty the empress, I announce the following to all citizens of Garurujan! Just now, we have executed your accomplices as part of the collective punishment for your crime! 」

The Platoon Leader shouted loudly at the looming city walls, and a luminous trooper sent light messages at the same time. It wasn't clear how far the voice would carry, but if they kept repeating the same message through light, the other party would definitely receive it.

「The entire city is guilty of colluding with the rebels! The punishment will not be limited to the person involved, but the entire family! Every citizen in Garurujan and their kin are subjected to this collective punishment!」

Unhappiness welled up in the Platoon Leader’s chest as he shouted words that went against his own senses.

「This time, the eight criminals we executed are accomplices from the town of Zueri to the northeast! From now on, we will continue to arrest accomplices from all the villages within the province and execute them!」

The faces of the soldiers started to twitch. Announcing that they would persist with the executions — meant they would be doing the same thing from tomorrow onwards, which filled them with dread.

「There is only one way to atone for your heavy crimes! Stop defending the fortress and open the gates! Accept the Empress’ merciful hand! Before you atone for your crimes, the blood of your accomplices will dye this land red!」

His mouth felt really dry. As he saw himself descend down the path of evil, the Platoon Leader didn’t have the right to remain silent and read the decree a second time as instructed.

「I say again! By decree of Her Majesty the empress, I announce the following to all citizens of Garurujan —」



「—They arrested accomplices and executed them?」

Juice spilled from the copper cup in his right hand. The instant Mitokazuruku received that report, the excitement in his heart disappeared, and a darkness engulfed his heart.

「How is that possible! They call themselves the national army, there is no way they can allow such an atrocity!」

「But that is the truth. The soldiers situated on the outer walls and many people witnessed that scene.」

The 「Strategist」 adjutant Metrache reported with a stiff voice. Her superior chew on his thumbnail in deep thoughts.

「Who is the opposing commander? Is there really someone who would resort to such means within the Imperial Army…?」

The Strategist added to his mumblings:

「It isn't clear if this has anything to do with this matter — but the banner of the crown had been sighted.」

Mitokazuruku turned suddenly outside. This wasn't something that he could ignore.

「Her Majesty has come personally? I did hear she visited the frontlines several times after her coronation...」

The man shook his head with a wry smile as he considered whether this fact has anything to do with this situation.

「...No, it's not related. Her Majesty is just a 16 years old child, it's impossible for her to command an army. She is just here as a figurehead.」

When her superior made that conclusion, the strategist used this chance to ask another troubling question.

「Word of the execution is spreading and causing unease to the citizens. If we are to prepare this fortress for a long siege, we can't ignore this trend. Generalissimo, please give a speech to calm the citizens —」

A copper cup was flung at her before she even finished, staining her breasts with orange juice. Her superior who threw the cup roared:

「You don’t have to tell me, I know!」

With that, the man turned and left the commander’s office. Behind Metrache watching him go with her head bowed, the 「concubine」 Niam said with a snort:

「Pissing him off like a fool, huh.」

Metrache wiped the stains on her breasts with a handkerchief as she coldly answered those hostile words.

「... I’m different from you who just needs to fawn over your master.」

The two of them glared at each other silently. This scene was more illuminating than any description of the relationships between the two adjutants.

「Citizens of Garurujan! Quiet please! Quiet please!」

A large group of citizens who heard about that 「execution」 gathered at the steps on the third level leading up to the fourth. Those without permission may not enter this area. Mitokazuruku rushed there, and questions flooded him.

「Many of you must have heard news about the executions just now! Everyone must understand after learning this fact! The national army has gone mad!」

Feeling the stir amongst the citizens, the man continued.

「Do you understand? They are using the lives of the people they should protect as a weapon! To force us to surrender in fear— this atrocity cannot be tolerated! They are using the name of the young Empress to commit this act of terror, they are the real treasonous army in all sense of the word!」

He emphasized that he was on the side of justice and tried to put the citizens at ease without a concrete plan. The man tried his best to divert everyone’s attention.

「But I won’t lose to them! I will resist the atrocity against the rebel army and protect everyone’s lives! I will not let the enemy step into Garurujan city, so don’t worry!」

It was an empty promise, but paired with his charismatic appearance, his words soothed the citizens a little. But it was impossible to fudge things through with just that, and questions flooded in when he paused.

「But, what about the executions?」 「Who will be executed this time!?」 「I have relatives in Zueri town...!」

「Calm down! Please calm down, everyone!」

He didn’t say anything other than that. When the citizens got tired of shouting, Mitokazuruku intentionally paused. When speaking to an excited crowd, feeling the breathing of the group and talking during the gaps was key. Seizing the instant the crowd quiet down, he spoke again:

「—Don’t be fooled! The enemy’s goal is to waver your hearts like this! They want to disrupt our unity and make us collapse from the inside! Don’t fall for their despicable schemes! Don’t give up!」

The man said as he thumped on his thick chest. With this signature move to make himself more prominent, Naian Mitokazuruku announced loudly.

「Please leave this to me! I, Mitokazuruku, promise you that I will bring the best results! Just like I have always done, I will protect the peace of this city and province! Please believe me and bear with it for now...!」

「Start firing! Don’t let the enemy come near!」

The explosion of compressed air echoed out loud. The garrisoned Garurujan soldiers engaged from behind cover against the incoming Imperial army.

「But Captain… What's the purpose of that thing?」

One soldier asked. Within their sights were wooden catapults seven to eight times longer than an average male adult. They were lined up more than 100 metres away.

「There were only three large catapults near the outer walls and a handful of infantry. It's too small a force for a diversion.」

「I know, but we can't ignore it either.」

The Captain couldn't discern the intentions of the enemy either. As he watched with suspicious eyes, the vertical catapult slowly bent with a creak.

「It's going to fire! All units on guard!」

Shortly after that warning, three heavy objects flew over with the sound of the wind. It barely cleared the outer walls and fell behind the soldiers in an arc.

「Check the area that got hit! Damage report!」 The soldiers nearby immediately sprint to the landing spot and return in less than two minutes.

「There is no damage to lives or property! The projectile aren't rocks nor munition!」

「What? Then what did they throw over here?」

「Please wait. It's covered by many layers of leather, we are not sure what's inside yet...」

「Be careful. It might be the carcass of animals, meant to spread diseases.」

Reminding his men to stay on guard, the captain walked to the landing point. The soldiers carefully cut open the leather and gasped when he saw what was inside.

「Yes— it's bones.」

「What?」

「It appears to be three skulls and… large amounts of human bone fragments...」

Hesitant to touch and confirm the contents, the soldier reported what he saw to his superior. At this moment, he discovered another strange thing.

「— Please wait. There's something inside the mouth of the skull… A folded piece of parchment?」

The soldier pulled it out with the tips of his fingers and laid it out on the ground. After browsing through the words on the paper, he fell silent again.

「Hey, don't stay quiet, read it out loud.」

「...『These are the remains of the accomplices in Kanuha village. If you fail to open the city gates, you will suffer the same fate』...」 The contents reported by his subordinate made the Captain twist his lips angrily.

「They are threatening us again... throw it away!」

「P-Please wait! If these are the remains of the accomplices, there might be citizens who are friends with them. It would be inappropriate to treat this lightly.」

「Tch... It's crush too finely to determine whose bones are these.
」

The Captain clicked his tongue because he couldn't take this lightly. The soldiers investigating the other spots rushed over at this time.

「We have checked the other two landing spots. Aside from the names of the village on the parchment, the contents are the same.」

「... Gather all of them and put them to one corner. Inform the Generalissimo and seek his advice.」

The Captain ordered after a long sigh. Remembering something, he turned to his subordinates nearby.

「Hey, do not tell the citizens about this, it will just stir up unrest. Understand?」

The soldiers nodded profusely. However— it was impossible to shut all of their mouths. He tried to conceal the information with his authority as the onsite commander, but there were too many people who knew the contents of the projectiles.

「... Have you heard? They threw bones at us this time.」

That night, news of the bones had spread to the citizens. Since they were staying in the same city, the soldiers and civilians would naturally interact with each other. Not just that, the truth was twisted with each iteration.

「It's filled with bones, right? The numbers don't match the people they executed. They killed people in other places too.」

「Is it true that they are treating us as part of the rebellion? We just happen to be living in this city, this can't be right?」

No one could answer that question. As the air grew heavier inside the bar, the citizens drowned themselves with beer to forget their worries.

「... The city is getting gloomier with each passing day.」

The situation in the city grew too big to be ignored and was reported to the commander. With his concubine Niam serving him, Mitokazuruku groaned with his arms crossed and face bitter.

「I never expect this to happen. I'm confident of handling any attacks, but they are focusing only on wavering the hearts of the masses...」

「Not just the citizens, panic is spreading amongst the troops too. I have to admit, these acts are effective against the rank and file who didn't have the resolve to become a rebel.」

Metrache's words fleshed out the seriousness of the situation. Niam glared at the strategist who made her master suffer, then leaned close to the man with a seductive smile.

「Lord Mitokazuruku, please cheer up...」

「Shut up, Niam, you are useless here.」

Mitokazuruku harshly admonished his concubine, and Metrache's lips showed a clear sense of superiority.

「Pardon me for interrupting, I have a proposal in mind. To change the heavy atmosphere brought on by bad news, the simplest way would be to bring good news. Why don't we switch from defence to offence and score a victory?」

「— Not bad. But, can it be done?」

「I think it's possible. The enemy must be assuming that we will be defending the fortress stubbornly, so the defences of their camp must be relaxing gradually, there are weak spots everywhere. One of them is the resource depot to the northeast of the city.」

Metrache explained as she pointed to the map of the surrounding areas on the table.

「We will launch a fierce attack under the cover of night. We can seize their provisions for our own use, and the heavy blow against the enemy will encourage the citizens. More importantly —」

「— We can show the citizens that we will not stand idly by like sheep to the slaughter.」

The man evaluated the plan, nodded, then turned to the strategist to give his order.

「I permit the execution of this plan. You will have full command of this operation, Metrache.」

「By your leave.」

Metrache accepted the order with a salute. Right now, the grudgeful gaze of the concubine made her happier than anything else.



「—Is the security at the place I designated relaxed?」

「Yes, it is proceeding as Your Majesty decreed.」

Torway Remeon answered the Empress from a kneeling position. Inside the large tent set up for one person alone, the jade-eyed youth conversed with the monarch with absolute authority behind the silk curtain.

「If they are quick, it will be tonight, they will attack that place sooner or later. Welcome them as we already planned.」

「Tonight... Huh.」

「That is quite possible. Their strategist is eager to earn war merits.」

Quiet laughter came from the other side of the curtain. Torway didn't move his lowered gaze.

「You all mentioned that Mitokazuruku has two kinds of adjutant, a strategist and a concubine— which of the two do you think will yearn to make a mark for herself?」

The youth thought quietly at that question. This probably involved the delicate relationships between man and woman— he knew he couldn't give a witty answer to questions of such nature.

「You don't know? It's the strategist. The concubine can earn favour with her master every night, but that isn't true for the strategist. If she wants to attract the attention of her superior, she can only do so by winning victories during a war.」

I see. Torway said after figuring that out. This wasn't just the relationships between man and woman. The youth changed his mind and lamented his own incompetence.

「Hence, the strategist on that side is very thirsty, and will probably jump right into our trap.」

The jade-eyed youth nodded in agreement. The stern gaze pierced him through the curtain.

「Don't be stingy with the bait, cast them all out. Just pretend that you got tricked, and those guys will carry their spoils of war back to their nest — without knowing that it has been poisoned.」

Same day, late night. The proposed plan by Metrache went off without a hitch, without any resistance. Metrache left the pillaging of resources to her subordinates, then went to the Commander's Office with brisk steps to report the success of the mission to the commander.

「The attack was an easy triumph. They really relaxed their guard. Before the enemy forces could mass and retaliate, we took off with all their resources.」

The strategist reported with feigned calmness. Mitokazuruku's face was filled with glee when he heard that and hugged his adjutant.

「Well done, Metrache! A splendid result, this will improve the mood of the citizens too.」

「Thank you for your compliments.」

Metrache answered with a mesmerized expression while she was held by thick and strong arms. He leaned to her ear and whispered.

「Come to my room later for your reward.」 「...Yes.」

Metrache nodded, backed away, saluted and left the Commander's Office. Someone happened to be standing at a corner of the corridor with a stiff face.

She locked eyes with the 「Concubine」.

「What is it, Niam? Why are you just standing there, aren't you going to show off your charm?」

「...!」

The taunted Niam pursed her lips and glared back. Metrache smiled confidently and met her gaze.

「That's just fine. You seem to have forgotten that this is a battlefield — A cat in heat can just tremble in a corner, don't get in the way.」

After gloating at the part that hurt her the most, she left the place gleefully.

Same time, different place. Some presence appeared amongst the large amount of cargo captured on Metrache's instructions.

「—The voices outside have lessened.」

「Good, everyone get out.」

The Imperial soldiers hiding in the cargo broke out of the crates and sacks from the inside. After picking up the weapons stored together with them in the crates, they formed up by section level, and all men were accounted for.

「Don't let the sentry detect us and blend right into the city.」

After pushing the empty crates into the deep corner to not let anyone notice, they slipped out of the warehouse quietly. A platoon of 40 soldiers disappeared into the darkness.

Two weeks later, contrary to Mitokazuruku's expectations, the atmosphere in Garurujan city worsened.

「Another execution today...」「If this goes on, we will...」「Are my relatives living in the towns safe?」

The executions visible from the outer walls and the throwing of bones via catapult continued every day. And that wasn't the only thing making the citizens waver.

「—We will all die if we left things to Lord Mitokazuruku!」

The shouting of alarmists echoed in the streets. Ever since the strategist Metrache seized the national army's supply depot, people making such seditious speeches started appearing all over the city.

They were agents disguised as traveling merchants, wandering priests or beggars. It was easy for outsiders to sneak into a city with such a huge human traffic. After infiltrating the city by hiding in the cargo, their first mission was to incite the citizens to liberate the city.

「Hey, don't say that.」「The patrols will hear you.」「But if this goes on...」

They were active in the underground scene, but they didn't do anything special aside from voicing out the unease everyone was already feeling. Just by doing that, they changed the atmosphere in the city. For the group doing the inciting, the people who harbour a vague sense of danger and lack autonomy was frighteningly easy to manipulate.

「—Hey～ How about this? We can be the ones to open the city gates.」

After their unease raised to a certain level, they were finally willing to commit to a specific course of action. At this time, the citizens felt that this proposal felt very real. They had been groomed enough to consider such an idea.

「Gather more people and head to the north gate where the road is wide. If we protest as a large group, the soldiers will let us through. After all, we are not in the wrong, right? No, not just that, Lord Mitokazuruku starting a revolt and dragging us down with him is

troubling. We will get executed if we get involved, what kind of joke is that?」

Without agreeing or disagreeing, the citizens looked around them to watch the other people's reactions. And then — what the agent said pushed the timid group to make up their mind.

「There's no need for everyone to flee, those who want to stay can stay. Even if we run, it won't affect the combat potential of the city, so you don't need to think you are betraying Lord Mitokazuruku. Isn't it the same if we support him from outside the city? Am I wrong?」

After using an excuse to neutralize their sense of guilt, he gave them the final push to carry out their plan. When the mob's mentality reached this stage, the result would be the same even if they were left alone. After the mob mentality of the citizens took over, they reached the conclusion that the agent was guiding them to.

「Inform as many people as you can and we will take action tomorrow evening.」

The next day, the incident happened as planned.

「Generalissimo Sir! The citizens who wish to leave the city are flooding towards the northern gates!」

Metrache rushed into the Commander's Office and shouted. Mitokazuruku groaned with his head in his hands.

「Impossible, the citizens are getting impatient too fast...! Convince the mob and get them to disperse! It's impossible for us to open the gates under such circumstances!」

「I already tried, but the citizens are too riled up and refuse to listen. They can't even hear my voice because of all the noise...」

The strategist said in shame. The man looked down the streets with rage.

「Enough, I will go! If I speak to them, the citizens will —」

「...? No, that's too dangerous Your Excellency!」

Metrache blocked the path of her irate superior and said agitatedly.

「It has been quite a long time since we garrisoned this fortress, so there is a chance the enemy has infiltrated the city! This might be a trap to lure you out, Your Excellency. If you show up before the citizens, you might get sniped by a Wind Gun...!」

「Tch...!」

Mitokazuruku understood the danger and twitched his face. Before he could throw his temper, Metrache decided on a course of action.

「... I will handle the citizens, please stay in the Commander's Office.」

With that, she left the Commander's Office immediately without waiting for a reply. At that point — she saw Niam standing at the same spot by the corridor as the last time she met her.

「—Isn't that your fault～?」

The 「concubine」 asked the 「strategist」 passing by before her teasingly.

「Lord Mitokazuruku didn't notice, but you know that the enemy might have infiltrated the city, don't you?」

「......」

「It's during that time, right? When you seized the enemy's provisions and brought it back, the enemy hid in there too. The defences of the supply depot was weak to lure you in, and you got tricked, thinking you accomplished a big victory.」

Niam pointed out her opponent's mistake with a giggle, and Metrache hung her head with her fists clenched tight.

「...I can't refute that. If you want me to apologize, I will — But Niam, I have something more important to ask of you.」

Suppressing her pride painfully, she pleaded with the opponent she detest the most.

「After I go to the north gate, please stop Lord Mitokazuruku. I took on this mission, but it will be difficult to convince the citizens… He might get impatient and try to go there personally.」

「You want me to stop him? Hmm～ Well～」

「Please! You want to protect him, just like I do, right?」

Metrache bowed and pleaded with her. Niam opened her eyes wide at the sight of Metrache putting her pride aside, then sighed with a shrug.

「To be frank, I think Lord Mitokazuruku's luck is out.」

「...... Huh?」

The confused 「strategist」 asked her. Niam suddenly changed her tone.

「We were all excited when we defended this fortress in the beginning, but the situation has turned on its head now. Even if we make it past for a few more days, he will lose sooner or later. My senses are really keen for things like this.」

「What... did you say...?」

「I'm talking about what will happen after we lose. Both of us need to think about our future.」

Before she heard everything, Metrache already moved. Her slap towards Niam's face was easily dodged since Niam already saw it coming.

「Shameless! How dare you say that in front of my face...!」

「Oh～ how ferocious. That's why straight-laced people are such a pain～」

Niam pulled over with a joke, then sighed.

「Let me say this first, don't try to use what I said to tell on me. Even if you try, I will just insist that you made that accusation up. That will just worsen His Excellency's mood.」

「......!」

「Conversely, I won't tell him that you are the one who let the enemy infiltrate in. So we are even.」

Niam offered a secret deal, which made Metrache ground her teeth and avert her eyes away.

「... I will get my subordinate to stop His Excellency. I was a fool to ask you.」

「Yes yes～ work hard then, even though it's probably a waste of effort.」

Niam waved, trying to convince herself that wasn't true.

The 「strategist」 started walking along the corridor again.

「Don't come any closer!」 「Stay back! Stay back, back—!」

At the gates on the north side of the city, the soldiers were forced to face the citizens swarming in with their luggage. The crowd who had gathered here since the morning grew larger with time and completely flooded the road before the gates.

「Oh no, there's even more people now!」 「We can't stop them, what should we do!?」

The soldiers pushing the mob back wailed. Seeing the situation deteriorate, the commander made the decision after careful consideration.

「There's no choice, fire warning shots! Fire into the sky!」

The soldiers aimed their unloaded Wind Guns and fired into the air in unison. The sound of compressed air explosion made the citizens in the front reeled back in fear, but it didn't have much effect on the people behind. The spooked citizens traded places with those behind them, and the mob pushed forth with the same energy as before.

「No good, the gunshot was drowned out by the noise...!」 「There's no deterrent effect at all!」

The soldiers clicked their tongues at the ineffectiveness of that move. They had long past the stage where they could settle this with warning shots. Unless they brought out Blast Cannons, it would be impossible to use that method.

Metrache who returned to the chaotic scene felt a chill at the situation that deteriorated so fast and gave out instruction.

「We don't have enough people to deal with so many civilians, call for more back up! You lot, form a human chain before the gate! And don't let them near the gate control device!」

Seeing that it was impossible to block the entire mob, Metrache identified the key places to protect and concentrated her forces there. But the soldiers immediately questioned her orders.

「Can we act so passively? The civilians are agitated, I don't see this ending without bloodshed —」

「No! Avoid harming the civilians, this is the Generalissimo's orders!」

The woman shook her head firmly. The citizen's support was the foundation of Mitokazuruku's power, so Metrache drew the line that couldn't be crossed. It would be all over if the citizens deserted him — as an officer based in a province, this knowledge was drilled deep into her heart.

「Only open fire if someone tries to activate the control switch! If we defend that place, the gate won't open no matter how many of them there are —」

Midway through her orders, she heard a loud alarm coming from the opposite direction — from the city centre.

「— What's going on?」

Before long, a confused messenger came running.

「E-Enemy attack—! Large enemy units are approaching the city! Especially to the south, they are launching a large scale attack with siege weapons!」

「What—」

She was speechless for a few seconds before her face twisted from regret.

「The timing is too good. This is their ploy...! I retract my order, send the reinforcements to the south gate! We can't waste time on these citizens right now!」

「What should we do here!? We can't leave them be!?」

「Leave a platoon to guard the gate control device and continue firing warning shots into the air from the top of the gates. There aren't many citizens willing to brave a hail of bullets, so use this method to keep them at bay!」

Metrache issued this final order before heading south to deal with the enemy attacks — However, she missed out on one thing. The soldiers weren't just dealing with civilians.

「Look, that's the device to open the gates! Let's charge to that place!」

Shortly after Metrache left the gates, the civilians who noticed the control device on the walls started targeting that spot. The ones coercing them were the national army soldiers who infiltrated into the city.

「Stay back! My superior gave permission for me to fire, anyone who comes will eat a bullet!」

The soldiers defending the control device had to raise their guns. Seeing the guards forming ranks to protect the device, it was clear they didn't want to let anyone through, which made the citizens erupt from displeasure.

「What? Are you kidding me!?」 「Let us out! Return us our freedom!」 「We have women and children with us!」

With all the attention on the citizens protesting loudly, the national army soldiers realized that this was their chance.

「— Good, do it.」

With that order, they poke the barrels of their guns out from the wall of people — and pull the trigger.

「Shyaa—!」 「...! Gwahh!」 「...What...?」

The soldiers on the stairs squatted down after getting hit. They thought they just had to deal with civilians and couldn't deal with the sudden change of events.

「E-Enemy attack—! Those guys have Wind Guns!」 「Return fire! Return f— Hyaa?」

Covering fire from a different angle hit the city guards who hesitated a few seconds before starting their attacks. Seeing their comrades got hit one after another, the soldiers opened their eyes wide from surprise.

「The shooting isn't just coming from the front!」 「Damn it, where? Where are they aiming from?」

They frantically scanned the area, but it was in vain. The snipers laying down suppressive fire were on a tree 40 m away, and a roof 60 m away.

Since this was an Imperial Fortress City, the national army naturally knew the layout of Garurujan. The soldiers also knew the gate control device was beside the gate and already had a detailed plan to suppress that area when they were in hiding.

The device was deep inside the wall, but the guards on the stairs were exposed to gun fire. The plan had a 50% chance of success once the agents infiltrated the city, and that had risen to 100% now. The national army was already sure that the enemy would be at a disadvantage.

「The return fire has stopped— Quickly, move in!」

When the sniping dealt a great deal of damage, the assault team mixed into the mob charged in. The enemy soldiers who retreated to the walls out of fear of being shot couldn't deal adequately with this attack. They were already faltering from before and got wiped out in less than a minute.

「Suppression complete. How's the control device?」

「We have secured it! Opening the gates immediately!」

「Hurry! Guide our allies into the city now!」

Ten of the soldiers turned the huge windlass and the tightly closed gates started to creak.



On the other end, the pudgy youth was watching this scene with a battalion of men outside the city.

「Major Matthew, the gates are opening!」

「Yes, the infiltration team did great— sapper team, set up wedges in front of the gates! The other soldiers are to cover them!」

The soldiers immediately started assaulting the city. The sappers rushed through the shots fired from the walls to the half-opened gates, and erected two metre tall wooden wedges on either end of the gates while the infantry protected them

「There are lots of people inside the gate! The attacking unit will hold and let the fleeing citizens out first! There are wedges under the gates, so it won't close so easily!」

The mob of civilians rushed out as Matthew issued his order. Afraid of hurting the civilians by mistake, the enemy soldiers on the walls didn't fire while the mob was fleeing.

「Most of the civilians are out! The shooting from the walls have ceased!」

「Good, charge! Go right into the urban districts!」

The moment the crowd cleared away, the civilians exit turned into the entrance for Matthew's unit. When the army breached the gates, the fall of the Fortress City Garurujan was just a matter of time.



「W-What's going on?」

The ruler of the city watched the scene leading to the end of his ambitions.

「The northern gate has been breached… The national army is in the city!?」

Mitokazuruku shouted hysterically, and his staff officers reported to him with cramped faces:

「R-Right now, our forces are engaging the enemy on the 1st and 2nd level. However, most of our forces had been diverted to the south, so we are outnumbered in the city...」

「Defending the zones below the 2nd level is hopeless… We should pull back our forces and consolidate on the upper levels.」

「Where! Where can we set up a defence line!?」

「G-Given the current situation… We should consider foregoing the 3rd level and defend the upper levels...」

The staff officers answered with cold sweat on their brows, and what they said made Mitokazuruku feel dizzy.

「Only the 4th and 5th levels...? We lost all the urban districts, so that's half of the city!?」

Before he realized it, most of his organs had been seized. He felt a sense of vertigo as he desperately searched for a way to survive.

「Anyway, recall the forces in the south to the upper levels! Since they have infiltrated the urban districts, there's no point in defending the gates! We have to secure a defence line and rally our forces!」

When they heard that order, the staff officers looked at each other sheepishly. 「Our units in the southern outer walls are under attack from the enemy that breached the northern walls, and is locked in battle...」

「We want to recall them back, but we don't know how many can make it back...」

They couldn't even pull their remaining forces back. When he learned of that fact, Mitokazuruku who couldn't even struggle any more stood there stiffly.

「...Hey〜 You lot. Could this be a—」

The man looked down the streets of Garurujan through the window and asked as he watched the familiar scene before him:

「— lost cause?」

None of his staff officers said anything, and their silence was the answer.



The battle ended at noon. When the national army entered the urban districts from the north, the isolated unit who lost contact with their headquarters surrendered one by one. The forces in the south gate who resisted to the end gave up when they saw a white flag raised in their headquarters.

「There's a gun on your back, don't think about doing anything funny.」

Metrache who was commanding the forces at the south gate was taken prisoner after they surrendered. Matthew instructed his men to raise their guns and walked to her back.

「... You are young for an officer. Are you the battalion commander?」

「I'm Major Matthew Tetzirich. I will be grateful if you don't mention my age.」

The youth answered with an annoyed face. Metrache understood when she heard that.

「I see, so you are a member of the 『Knights Corp』, huh... After joining the group that won in the last civil war, you have made it big. It makes me envious.」

「You are not actually qualified to be mocking me.」

「That's right. I'm just ranting about sour grapes.」

Feeling disappointed about herself for failing to even be sarcastic, Metrache sighed deeply. As they walked up the stairs to the upper levels of the city, she asked again.

「Where are you taking me? If possible, can you tell me if Lord Mitokazuruku is safe?」

「You will probably see your superior officer later. But I can't guarantee his safety.」

The youth answered emotionlessly. The 「strategist」 eyes turned sharp.

「... What do you mean by that?」

「Because it will depend on what Her Majesty decides... So brace yourself for the worst.」

Matthew remained cold. His tone wasn't overtly threatening, and that gave Metrache goose bumps. She could feel from the youth's back that he was trying to accept something against his will.

They reached the 3rd level as they spoke and stopped before a house that the national army had commissioned for their use.

「Major Matthew Tetzirich, is here with the enemy commander's adjutant, Major Metrache Lance— to seek an audience with Her Majesty.」

The slightly plump youth stepped into the house first. Metrache followed him in, and felt a chill she had never felt before assault her.

「Good work, Major Matthew— Is that woman the 『strategist』?」

The soldiers were standing stiffly by the sides as the girl's loud voice echoed out clearly. The girl was seated in a temporary throne at the deepest part of the house.

Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik. She was wearing a dark coat decorated with silver and gold accessories like stars in the night sky, and the crown passed down the royal family for generations. She had grown taller after reaching the age of 16, her child-like features had matured into an intelligent and beautiful face. The Empress had a military sabre on her left waist, and after wearing it for two years, it no longer seemed out of place for her stature.

「Y-Your Majesty...」



And the thing that pressured those who seek an audience the most was the cruel smile on her lips and hellfire light in her eyes. Metrache even felt the illusion of those eyes scorching her, and her knees started to shake.

The Empress in a dark coat looked down at the prisoner as if she was looking at an ant on the verge of death and asked:

「Who gave this woman permission to raise her head in my presence?」

Metrache didn't realize her discourtesy before the throne, so Matthew grabbed her shoulder and forced her to kneel. After going through the barebones ceremony for an audience, the Empress spoke again:

「Metrache Lance. I will be questioning you personally, only answer my questions.」

「... Yes, My Liege...」

Feeling her throat turn dry, Metrache managed to squeeze out this answer. At this moment, two people were pulled up from the side. She was familiar with the both of them — The Commander Naian Mitokazuruku and the 「concubine」 Major Niam Nei.

「First question. Is this man your superior officer?」

The Empress asked from her throne. After analyzing the situation frantically, Metrache carefully answered.

「... Indeed, this is my superior officer, Sir Naian Mitokazuruku.」

「Good. Second question, is this woman your colleague?」

She pointed to the other person and asked. Metrache could only answer directly.

「... She is staff officer Major Niam Nei. L-Like me, she is... Sir Mitokazuruku's adjutant.」

She was stuttering, but Metrache still answered. When she heard that, the Empress shifted her gaze away as if she had lost interest.

「Good. Your questioning is over— Major Matthew, stuff her mouth.」

The pudgy youth grabbed Metrache as order and covered her mouth. She almost started to panic, but when she heard the youth plead 「Please don't struggle and stay still」, she instinctively realized that the youth was cautioning her.

She realized that she can't make any mistakes, or she won't live to see tomorrow.

「Well then, Naian Mitokazuruku. Remember what I just said?」

The Empress turned to the self declared Generalissimo. Metrache didn't know what the Empress meant but realized that they were conversing before she got here. Kneeling before the Empress, Mitokazuruku stayed silent with cold sweat on his face.

「If you don't remember, then I will repeat myself — if you give up your life, I will spare the two of them. If you choose to let them die, I will spare you. That's what I said.」

Metrache was at a loss as she looked up at the Empress, but Matthew behind her held her down. After a brief pause, Mitokazuruku squeezed out his voice:

「... Your Majesty, please don't go too far with your jokes...」

「Oh. Does it look like a joke to you?」

The Empress answered and her smile deepened slightly. Just that was enough to make Mitokazuruku feel that he had taken one step towards death, and he frantically took action.

「... Let me explain! Your Majesty, please give me a chance to explain!」 「Granted, speak.」

She accepted easily. Knowing this was his last chance, the man started speaking loudly:

「—I, loyal vassal of Empress Chamille, am Naian Mitokazuruku! I only raise in revolt out of concern for Your Majesty! The rebel army

is ravaging our nation by abusing your good name, and out of false fealty! My only wish is to chase those traitors away from your tailcoat!」

His desperate self-defence rang out in the room. The Empress watched with the cheerful expression of someone seeing a clown's performance.

「How intriguing. You are calling the army I command a rebel army?」

「Pardon me for saying so, but yes.」

「Let me ask you then, what's your rationale for labelling them as a rebel army?」

Mitokazuruku answered his Master's question without pause.

「Allow me to explain. After witnessing the circumstances of this battle, it was clear how deplorable the officers of the rebel army claiming to be the national army are. They used the citizens they should be protecting as tools of war, and felt no shame about such a despicable action.」

Matthew who was behind Mitokazuruku turned pale at that. It wasn't clear if Chamille knew how he reacted; the Empress continued asking cheerfully:

「Using the citizens as tools of war? What do you mean specifically?」

「First, the horrible public executions that struck fear into the hearts of the Garurujan citizens. It is clear how foolish that is, and the so-called accomplices are innocent citizens put to death by collective punishment. The poor residents of Garurujan just happened to be in the city when I started my revolt, but they were labelled as traitors and their kin were slain by association. This is an incomprehensible act of tyranny and brutality.」

The man continued talking as if he was being chased. This wasn't a figure of speech; he had bet everything on this chance to explain. He deeply believed that the girl before her didn't know about the evil nature of her vassals and was pushed onto her role of figurehead.

「Furthermore, they acted like devils when they catapulted the remains of the executed into the city. If they had a shred of respect for the dead, they wouldn't have done something so barbaric. I don't know who thought of this plan, but for it to be carried out without any objections fills me with dread.」

Every single word he used was dripping with hatred towards the act of brutality. Mitokazuruku exhausted his vocabulary, showcasing his glib of the tongue in this desperate battle.

「An army without ethical judgement is no longer an army, but a demon nest! The demonic nature of the man who is disguising as your loyal vassal is dangerous, and it pains me to see you being tricked into acting as his figurehead! Please open your eyes, Your Majesty!」

Mitokazuruku shouted with blood shot eyes. And then, the Empress who could no longer stand the amusing theatrics said:

「I'm the one who proposed these two plans.」

Time froze for that man. The delusion inflating in his heart started cracking because of what she said.

「—Huh?」

「The public execution and catapulting of the remains, both of those schemes are thought up and carried out on my orders. But I see now — they are acts of the devil in your eyes?」

「Huh— Ahh... Ughh...」

With his assumption overturned, Mitokazuruku was tongue tied. In a sense, he was a pure person. Up until this instant, he

unconditionally believed that his monarch had a wholesome sense of judgement.

「Let me ask you then, what's so wrong about the Empress using the lives of her citizens as tools?」

She questioned the foundation of his argument. With her hand on her breasts, the Empress continued:

「I'm the reigning Empress of the Katjvarna Empire. The 20 million citizens, everything on my land, even the tiniest blade of grass belongs to me. So, who can chastise me on how to use them? You mourn the death of innocent citizens whose lives have been used by me. I slapped away the hands of the officers with righteous minds like you and personally fanned the flames of war — isn't that all there is to it?」

Every action of the Empress was announcing that she felt no guilt at all. The girl held her chin with her hand, as if she thought of something and said to the speechless Mitokazuruku.

「Oh right— there's also god. The Four Great Sprites don't belong to me, they belong to god. I see, so it's not unreasonable for you to question my authority. Regrettably, I still don't know of any way to take possession of god.」

She looked irately at the sky beyond the ceiling before returning her gaze to the man.

「Well then, are you a god, Naian Mitokazuruku?」

「——」

「You are not. A god won't defend his actions — then you are my property. A property that has one foot in the garbage bin. Don't think so highly of yourself, retard.」

Her eyes of contempt pierced that man. Realizing that his all-out verbal defence had failed, Mitokazuruku stared at the floor blankly.

「This is wasting my time. Enough, I will tell you the conclusion of your earlier question.」

The Empress had enough of the clown's performance and returned to the topic.

「There's no need to consider too much. The Empire can maintain order as long as someone is punished for the crime. The three of you can take the punishment together — unfortunately, the Empire is starving for talent right now, and officers who have graduated from the Military Academy are valuable. I want to cut out the rot, but that should be kept to a minimum.」

She suddenly switched to a very pragmatic subject, which gave Mitokazuruku's brain some leeway to think. His fate wasn't sealed — He forced himself to think that way and listened carefully to the Empress.

「I will let you decide, Mitokazuruku. It shouldn't be difficult for you to judge with a perspective of a soldier, right? Let you live, or let your two adjutants live— You just need to consider the choice which will serve the Empire the best.」

And finally, she gave him two options. After his swing and miss just now, Mitokazuruku could no longer spare the effort to overturn the question.

「State your answer, Mitokazuruku. What will it be?」

The moment he was urged to answer, his brain froze. Since his only choice was to answer, he just needed to be honest with himself — And the words came out easily from his mouth.

「— I will offer their lives. Do what you will with them.」

His life was irreplaceable. That was Naian Mitokazuruku's conclusion.

「Niam, Metrache, don't beg for your lives. At least make yourself useful at the very end.」

The man glared at his adjutants, and warned with an urgent tone — In that instant, something inside the「strategist」, who was watching all this, shattered. She pushed Matthew's hand on her mouth away, and said at the risk of death:

「— My Lord, what do you mean by begging for my life?」

The woman said to the back of her superior officer with a trembling voice:

「I gave my life to you. I have always been telling you that, when I'm in service to you, in admiration of you — and when I'm in your arms.」

Memories of the past flashed across her mind as Metrache blinked away her tears. However— what pained her wasn't that those days were over.

「I'm willing to accept being your stepping stone if you get to live. I have always been willing.

But— you don't even believe the promise I made to you? And you are doubting until the very end that I will change my mind? You are treating Niam and me on the same level and warn me not to betray you!?」

What she couldn't stand was the days she spent with him being tarnished. For the man that she loved so deeply to doubt her.

「W-What am I to you? A strategist? A concubine? Or— a useless chess piece that couldn't serve as either?」

The man didn't answer. Seeing that the time was ripe, the Empress signalled Matthew to take Metrache's hand and walk to the entrance. She resisted desperately as she asked sadly to the man who was growing further away from her:

「Please answer me, Lord Mitokazuruku—」

Not relaxing the strength, he was exerting was the only way Matthew could show his gentleness. The door closed before her eyes

and they two of them — Metrache Lance and Naian Mitokazuruku would never meet again.

「— So, the final job has been done?」

The Empress' cold words reverberated in the silent room after the woman's scream faded away.

「Enough. Show me your fealty, Mitokazuruku.」

Mitokazuruku knelt before his monarch and bowed deeply at that request.

「... Your will is my command. How shall I prove my loyalty to you?」

He asked weakly and the Empress gave instructions without any hesitation.

「Kneel on both knees with your head low and arms stretched out.」

「...? Yes, as you wish.」

He didn't understand the purpose of those instructions, but he didn't give it a second thought and carried it out. Leaning forward with his arms before him, Mitokazuruku asked again:

「Will this be fine?」

「Yes, that will do just fine— Do it, Lucanti!」

With her red hair swaying with her movements, a knight charged forth from the rank of guards flanking the throne, and cut off the arms of that unsuspecting man.

「Uwwaaahhhhh!?」

The man's scream echoed in the room. The thick scent of blood lingered in the house and the Empress frowned with displeasure.

「What an ear sore, shut him up.」

The officers near Mitokazuruku covered his mouth in response. Resisting by waving his stumps around, the man called out to the Empress with froth in his mouth:

「Y-You said you will spare me! That I alone will live...!」

「You think you have a chance to escape death? How shallow, traitor.」

With her elbow on the throne and her palm on her chin, the girl declared irately:

「What I want you to do, is your last job as their superior officer. Do you understand?」

「Hah...!」

「You don't? It's the handover of duties. Ever since the 『concubine』 was brought before me, she started searching for a new master. But the 『strategist』 was still mesmerized by you. I could tell with a glance— If I want to separate them from Naian Mitokazuruku and claim them for myself, we will need through a ritual.」

Mitokazuruku opened his eyes wide with despair. Empress Chamille deepened her smile.

「Without those theatrics, Metrache Lance will probably kill herself to mourn your death. I have to thank you for that, Mitokazuruku. Thanks to that short scene you acted out, that woman's fantasy about you was crushed. It is a fact that the Empire lacks talented people, so I can't let a young officer die because of the likes of you.」 The girl stopped smiling here and shook her head pitifully.

「But in the end, you are mistaken. That choice isn't to determine your fate, but to decide your adjutants' future— Well, it will also decide how you will die. You have chosen the more painful way.」

The Empress said to him and got up from her throne. She slowly walked to the man pressed down into a pool of his own blood, leaned in, and whispered into his ears:

「Your limbs will be severed and you will be executed by impalement.」

「——?」

「That's how a traitor like you will die, Mitokazuruku. The execution will be carried out at the top level of this Fortress City Garurujan— the top of the steeple on the fifth level. The sappers will carry you there and tie you right to the steeple top alive. Wouldn't that be a grand tomb? The view of the city will be just wonderful.」

A fear Mitokazuruku had never felt before cleared his foggy mind. He suddenly realized that medics who were swarming him like fleas were stemming his bleeding to stop him from dying.

「You will spend a few days alive, and a few years dead, to show what will happen to anyone who defies me. This will truly be the last mission of your life.」

「—Hiee—」

「Stop being noisy. I'm absolutely grateful to you as a monarch, Mitokazuruku. I can't let anyone but you volunteer for this great task!」

Empress started laughing uncontrollably. Fearing the figure mocking him from the bottom of his heart, Mitokazuruku looked around him with tears in his eyes.

「S-Someone… Save… Save me...!」

He tried to latch on to anyone that could save him, but no one answered. Most of the officers were controlled out of their fear of the Empress just like Mitokazuruku, just to different degrees. In the face of tragedy, there were basically two types of reactions: Averting

their eyes until it was over or suppressed their emotions and focus on their work.

「...Niam... Please save me! Please help me plead with the Empress for mercy! Please, please...!」

In this situation, his last hope was the 「concubine」. Since the 「strategist」 wasn't here, this was probably the natural choice for Mitokazuruku. However, his plea fell on deaf ears. After looking at her former master like she was looking at walking garbage, Niam turned to the Empress and bowed deeply.

「— Your Majesty, this lowly Niam Nei will be a house cat that is only loyal to you.」

After her laughter subsided, the Empress said quietly to Niam behind her:

「Yes. And then?」

「I don't want to die like him. Can you please employ me?」

Niam made no attempt to hide her intention or dressed up her words. She understood that she would lose her head next if she tried that. She understood the person before her wouldn't even hesitate.

Satisfied with the correct answer, Empress slowly turned to look straight at Niam and said firmly.

「If you want food, then hunt for rats. That's all I will say to you.」

Her cold brutal smile made the woman who was no longer a concubine shiver — The contract was made, and she joined the Empress as a new member of her vassals.

Chapter 4

The Midst of Turbulence

The scene changed to the Imperial Capital Banhataal. The citizens standing on either side of the road cheered to welcome the return of the punitive force led personally by the Empress.

The victory parade was more extravagant then the sending off parade. String and wind instruments played a majestic tune as the Empress' carriage toured one time around the city. It returned to the palace after displaying the authority of the Empress to the people.

Instead of feeling hyped up, the citizens watching the parade felt somewhat confused. The sight of their monarch personally taking to the field and returning victoriously had long faded from their memories.

The Empress this time was young and could get things done, an evaluation that everyone was talking about. The rumours had crossed great distance by word of mouth, including the strategy used by the Empress to attack the Fortress City Garurujan, and the downfall of the traitor Naian Mitokazuruku.

「Suppressing the rebellion swiftly and returning triumphantly. How splendid, Empress Chamille.」

General Terushinha Remeon's voice echoed loudly in the Grand Courtyard of the Deep Green Hall. After the returning monarch sat on the throne in the deepest end of the hall, she looked down on the two generals welcoming her back.

「It's just a sham of a rebellion and a laughable dispute. It's not a hassle at all.」

The 28th Generation Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik said plainly, leaning her arm on the throne and her chin on her palm. General Remeon said in surprise:

「Naian Mitokazuruku isn't strong?」

Empress nodded, twisting her lips, and saying in disbelief:

「That guy — before talking about strategy or tactics, he lacks conviction. He seized the city and started a revolution, but is so fearful of the mood of the citizens, how unsightly.」

The jade-eyed General fell silent with a complicated expression and Chamille shrugged before him.

「In another sense, he got confused because of how peaceful it is, this is the adverse result of him attending to the citizens kindly in place of the Governor. If he wants to make the revolution a success, he should make the citizens shut up through shock and awe. The situation would be different if he fired a salvo at the mob, but he couldn't work up the resolve to do so, leading to his defeat — Don't you think so? General Shiba.」

She turned to the other General kneeling before her. Kubalha Shiba nodded without hesitation.

「That is true. Your Majesty is swift in your decision to sacrifice the civilians.」

General Remeon's face turned stiff as the Empress curled her lips.

「— Hahaha! I like your courage to mock me, it doesn't feel too bad, Kubalha Shiba. Compared to the times when you keep saying 『boring』, you are like a new energetic man!」

After laughing for a while, the girl continued gleefully.

「One of the 『Twin Jewels of the Sun』, you won't tell me that what I did was wrong, right? I'm confident in trading the minimum sacrifice to achieve the maximum results. And the price is just

executing the prisoners on death row in that province earlier. Nothing of value was lost.」

The monarch declared nonchalantly and General Shiba answered with a stern face:

「So it's death row inmates charged with treason by association… I will turn a blind eye to that since they are fated to die. I will think of their sacrifice as saving the lives of soldiers.」

However— he switched tones firmly. General Remeon tried to stop him with a gaze, but it was useless.

「I can't ignore the fact that Your Majesty gave orders to keep this fact a secret. If we don't make this public, then the story that Your Majesty sacrificed the civilians to suppress the rebellion will be passed down the generations. Do you know how serious that will tarnish your reputation? I won't be surprised if you get a title like 11th Emperor 『Lord Executioner』.」

General Shiba didn't mince his words, and that left the Empress in stitches.

「You are making me laugh! Why did you mention the worst Emperor in Imperial history here!?」

She laughed in the face of her vassal's selfless advice. This has gradually turned into a routine in the past two years and was developing just as Chamille wanted.

「But that's fine by me. It will be great to get the title 『Lord Executioner』. If I make that title famous throughout the world, no one will forget about me, the Empress. I will work hard to emulate the 11th generation.」

Once she made up her mind, she wouldn't budge. After shutting General Shiba up, the Empress changed topics.

「Well then— Generals. While I'm gone, is the central defences secure?」

It was his turn to speak again, so General Remeon lifted his head.

「— Your Majesty, when you were out on campaign, there had not been any signs of any groups attempting to revolt. As for minor cases, there had been four soldiers confined for Lèse-majesté, enlisted soldiers speaking ill of Your Majesty.」

「Four in the past two months? The rank and file are much more docile compared to when I just took the throne— and their punishment?」

「By your instructions, the three who publicly criticize Your Majesty will receive 5 lashes, and the one who insulted Your Majesty as a『unworldly wench』 will be executed.」

The Empress nodded emotionlessly to the General's report.

「Good. It's fine to fear me, hate me or even question me — but none shall insult me. Those who breach this rule will be executed. That's the rule I set.」

The monarch declared firmly, which made General Remeon gulp. Feeling the majestic aura of the monarch again, he continued his report.

「Aside from that, the former Igsem faction, and Remeon faction are staying in line… This is the result of Your Majesty display of authority for the past two years.」

「I see, this is a result indeed. The result of executing several thousand traitors.」

The Empress answered with a quiet laugh. Her penchant for intentionally stating her flaw often left her vassals at a loss.

「Really now— After the Igsem anchoring the organization retired from his post, there are a lot of guys who regressed their thinking back to the warring eras. There had been four large scale rebellions, with Mitokazuruku being the fifth. Why don't they consider being in my shoes, since I have to suppress them with all my might.」

「......」「——」

「I cut off his limbs and impaled him this time, the previous one was buried with only his head sticking out, and then sawing it off with a rusty saw. Before that, I threw the guy into a dog cage to feed them. I'm almost out of ideas on how to execute the mastermind. If only the 『Lord Executioner』 left any records, then I can use it as reference — Don't you think so, General Shiba?」

Ignoring her venomous words, General Shiba used his silent aura as a way of counselling her. She knew very well what he meant, but the Empress still had a cruel smile on her lips —

「General Shiba, please watch your words before Her Majesty. Don't scare me like that.」

As they walked shoulder to shoulder on the pavement outside the Deep Green Hall, General Remeon complained to the man beside him. General Shiba showed a bold smile.

「I've gone way past that two years ago, General Sir. The times and situation have changed, I won't turn back to the man I was back then.」

The man answered the jade-eyed General who held his forehead with a sigh.

「You have lost your edge recently though. The patriotic General Remeon who rose up to the occasion two years ago would have interjected more times than me in today's audience. Are you withering away because you lost your trusted adjutant?」

The merciless accusation made General Remeon hold his breath, and he averted his eyes bitterly.

「... You sure got guts. I know I'm mentally weak...」

「I can tell. You're not rebutting even after I went that far, that's really serious.」

He sounded more concerned than sarcastic, which made the jade-eyed General spend a lot of effort to figure out how to answer.

「Instead of that, I'm shocked that you can stay so motivated. General Shiba, considering how the figurehead you propped up two years ago is doing, I thought you would be more depressed.」

Why are you still so energetic? General Remeon asked directly and General Shiba closed his eyes with a serious expression.

「Indeed, that coup ended in an unexpected fashion. It wasn't an ending that I hope for — but nothing ever goes perfectly.」

He opened his eyes and looked back at the Deep Green Hall they just left.

「Well, the reigning Empress is outstanding. She has a clear head and unwavering will at such a young age, although her eyes are too gloomy — even so, she is the most capable monarch that the Empire had for the past few centuries.」

「You evaluate Her Majesty highly, so why is your attitude so strong towards her… from the perspective of a bystander, you look suicidal.」

The jade-eyed General nursed his stomach, and General Shiba smiled.

「Her Majesty has the resolve to be feared by the masses as a tyrant for her actions. That makes her reliable, but it is worrying for the future at the same time. To stop the pendulum from swinging in a negative direction, my attitude is my way of expressing my concern.」

「I understand how you feel. But you will lose your head if you keep this up.」

「If I can lay the foundation for the future, then my head is a small price to pay.」

The man laughed heartily— then shrugged with a bitter smile.

「...I might say that, but the situation doesn't allow me to be careless with my life. You are in such a terrible state, and I share your burden of being a General now. Put everything down and quit — I know things won't be that simple and clean.」

「... Can you not mix your encouragement for me together with your self reflection?」

「That's the proof that you have taken my advice to heart. I will be troubled if you stay useless. Compared to you, your son is full of drive.」

The face of his son flashed across his mind and General Remeon frowned— His youngest son Torway Remeon had changed drastically. Torway has become dependable and at the same time, his father felt he was treading on thin ice around him.

「... My behaviour was unsightly during the coup, and is in no position to say anything about my son. But, do you really have the resolve? The resolve to serve as the head of the Imperial Army under Her Majesty?」

「That's impossible. Have you forgotten, General Sir? I'm just the Chief of Staff.」

General Shiba cheerfully said something that was opposite of the truth. The jade-eyed General recalled that he said the same thing two years ago when they met as enemies.

「You might not understand, but waiting isn't painful for me anymore. Because I already know that the dawn will come.」

General Shiba looked at a large building in a different direction from the Deep Green Hall and told him quietly. That was the Harem where the concubines of the previous Emperors used to reside. He was waiting — waiting for the sun to rise from there again.

「Even so, those who have passed can never return...」

General Remeon muttered wearily and General Shiba nodded.

「Yes, after two years, I realized many things will never return to the way it is before, and I have concluded so.」

That includes many of their subordinates. The two Generals would have those deaths weighing on their shoulders. So many that they couldn’t finish mourning them all after two years.

「Accepting that emptiness would take some time too. Waiting is the only thing we can do. Because the young untainted souls aren’t as used to losses like we are.」



「—Damn it!」 After entering the Field-grade Officer’s common rest area, a pudgy youth sat in a corner and smashed his fist on the table. A female officer walking along the corridor scattered into her room when she heard the bang.

「Welcome back, Matthew-san. I heard the attack on Garurujan went smoothly.」

「Oh, it’s you, Haro... Yes, I’m back.」

Matthew’s anger subsided when he saw a dear friend. Haro sat down opposite him and looked around.

「Torway-san isn’t here? Both of you came back to the Central Base together, right.」

「He went to train his men. I told him to at least take the day off, but he won’t listen.」

The youth sighed again and grumbled with furrowed brows.

「He has completely changed. He is talking less, and I have not seen him smile for the past two years. He is always showing an obstinate face, eats his food expressionlessly, but he refuse to discuss things with me...」

The moment he spoke, his grievances started flooding out. Haro listened seriously and tried to answer as gently as she could.

「I think it's because of the heavy responsibilities he's shouldering. Torway-san's Remeon House... is now the leader of the three Houses.」

「It's the same for us too. Before we knew it, we are both Field-grade Officers.」

Matthew said with disgust and went prone onto the table.

「Give me a break... I'm not confident that I'm capable of living up to my status... but Her Majesty keeps giving me missions, and the older officers look at me strangely now. Then during the key moments, she refuse to listen to my opinion!」

The youth used this chance to vent his frustration. He made it big at such a young age, but things were tough for him too. His situation was also an exception among highflyers. In the military, promotions due to the backing of the Empress felt out of place instead of being honourable.

「... Hey, Haro. You know how we captured Garurujan?」

「... I heard a little, it's done through shaking the hearts of the people.」

「Shaken? It's not that simple, it was blackmail. Threatening the citizens that we will kill their friends and relatives if they don't open the gates, forcing them to turn. We gathered death row inmates from the provinces and executed them on the pretence of them being accomplices. After stuffing the bones of livestock into the remains of the death row inmates, then catapulted them into the city...」

All this information was confidential, but Matthew didn't hesitate to tell Haro. He felt that he would really fall apart if he couldn't even discuss things with her.

「What a detestable war. The fighting was already revolting, but worse of all — was how the mastermind Naian Mitokazuruku got executed. I don't want to talk further about that. I want to erase that memory from my mind, but his death throes kept reverberating in my ears...」

Matthew covered his ears and groaned. Haro couldn't bear seeing him like this and got up from her chair.

「You should rest for today. I will accompany you to your room...」

「I know, I know. But please, let me say a bit more, if I don't vent, I won't be able to sleep.」 Forcing Haro who was worried about him back into her seat, Matthew continue speaking passionately:

「To me, this isn't simply choosing a brutal execution method. Her Majesty— she fought a battle that dragged the citizens in. I can't help thinking she did so intentionally. It's a miracle that there weren't many casualties amongst the civilians. When the citizens flood out of the city gate, one mistake from the commander or the sappers, and it would have been a tragedy. And that would have been of our own making —」

Haro gasped. Instead of the criticism that would have earned him lashes, she was more worried about the danger that Matthew felt.

「I-I'm scared of Her Majesty. Not knowing what she's thinking scares me. Is the person sitting on the throne really the Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik that we knew? She wasn't like that in the past, back when we address her as Her Highness...」 He said nostalgically, and tears welled up in Matthew's eyes. He frantically wiped away the tears with the back of his palm. Thinking back to the days before they lost anything was too much for them right now.

「—Haro. Have you seen Ikuta while we were out on campaign?」

To conceal the fact that he cried, Matthew changed the topic. Haro nodded with a weak smile.

「I saw him twice. With permission from Her Majesty, I spoke to him about all manner of things… But didn't receive any response.」

I see. After hearing the answer he expected, the slightly plump youth nodded firmly.

「... What should we do? If that guy never recovers...」

Haro couldn't answer. There wasn't any light shining on this silence that was as heavy as lead, the two of them stared at the table.

At the same time, The screams of soldiers echoed deep in the forest some distance from the base.

「Shyyaa—!」 「Warrghh!」 「Hyaaa!」

The explosion of compressed air and the screams of their comrades drew closer from behind. A young soldier holding a Wind Gun barely dodged the pursuing attackers and ran desperately into the forest.

「—Hah! Hah!—」

He stumbled across the roots and soft rotting leaves on the ground. His limbs were worn out from exhaustion and he couldn't afford to stop to catch his breath. Because the enemy was picking off the ones who were least guarded first.

「Hah! Hah! Hah— Uwah!」

A figure suddenly appeared before the soldier focusing on running, making him raise his Wind Gun in alarm. The other party did the same, but a few seconds after their standoff, both men recognized each other and lowered their weapons.

「Sergeant Shikrat...! Where's the rest of your section?」

「Sergeant Major Mishan! You are safe!」

Sergeant Shikrat smiled after meeting a comrade, and the older female Non-Commissioned Officer nodded, pulling him into cover under a tree.

「My section is almost wiped out. The same for Sergeant Major Tatai's section...」

「They got taken out? Fell into a trap, the enemy pursued us persistently, and they 『died』 after they got separated from their section... Pretty much the same as my section.」

The next moment, respect and self-mocking showed in equal parts on the face of Sergeant Major Mishan.

「Can you believe it? They only have 8 men, and they are giving our platoon of 40 a good whipping...」

「To be honest, I can't figure out what they are doing, or what we should do about them. Is my training insufficient?」

「That's one part, but the main reason is that the opponent is too strong...」

The sound of shrubs being pried open interrupted their conversation. The two of them immediately pointed their muzzles at the source of the sound.

「They are here...! Don't show any opening, use the trees as shield and raise your weapons!」

「Yes!」

Sergeant Shikrat who was still hiding under the shade of the tree put a finger on his trigger. Above the head of the Sergeant who was waiting eagerly for the enemy to show up, a rope slowly descended silently down from their blind spot.

「—Uwah?」

The rope hooked his neck and pulled up strongly. The pain of his windpipe constraining made the Sergeant drop his Wind Gun, Sergeant Major Mishan beside him shouted in panic.

「Shikrat～!」

She stood up and tried to use her knife to cut the ropes, but a pink ball hit her head sticking out from behind the trees and exploded.

「— Guuu!」

With an impact that shook her brain, Sergeant Major Mishan became the last 「dead soldier」 and fell on her knees.

「...Do you understand? This is your standard right now.」

In the forest that returned to silence after the end of the battle, a jade-eyed youth looked sternly at the 40 soldiers covered in pink paint and sitting exhaustively on the ground.

「When snipers and traps are laid out in a dense jungle, the battlefield will become completely different. It will be more complicated, harsh and cunning — all of you already experienced that.」

The youth pointed to the woods behind as he spoke. With him at the lead, everyone else was wearing camouflage uniforms developed for jungle combat. They could blend people into the background, unlike the uniform of the past.

「I already taught you all the techniques. There are differences in our abilities because you have not made these knowledge a part of your flesh and blood. There are countless number of situations you might encounter on the battlefield, I can't tell you what's the correct course of action for each case. That's why you have to learn to think and independently judge on your actions without any orders from a commander.」

The youth stated the theory of his lessons he had repeated countless times. He wanted to carve the bitter memory of defeat along with his lecture deep into the flesh of his subordinates.

「All sections are to submit a reflection report. The next mock battle will be planned based on the point raised — That's all for today, dismissed.」

With no regards for his exhausted subordinates, the youth concluded things calmly before turning and leaving. He walked alone through the dim forest back to the base, mumbling self-reproaching words to himself.

「...... Not enough, not enough... soldiers, instructors and training time are all not enough...!」

The hunter said to himself gloomily. His aura scared the little critters on the trees and sent them scrambling, and the falling leaves fell in front of the youth.

「—Phew!」

Three leaves dropped about 30 m away. The moment he saw that from the corner of his eyes, the youth slid his Wind Gun down his shoulder and opened fire with just his right arm — the single shot pierced all three leaves before disappearing into the sky.

「... It's fine, Yatori-san. Don't worry, Ik-kun. I can do it. I will do it properly...」

He pleaded with twitching lips… The two people he respected the most weren't with him, so a lot of pressure was resting on his shoulders. Tormented by despair and his sense of responsibility, the youth's mental state was slowly going off track — He obtained god-like shooting prowess, as if that was the return he got for the sacrifices that were made.

However, this could be a form of adaptation too. His capability had improved to take on the mantle of the Igsem who bore the heavy burden of battle in the past, and the youth was always at the forefront of the battlefield — where the concept of war was constantly developed. As long as he stayed there, there was no chance he could maintain a normal mental state.

「I will fight... A Remeon has to defeat the enemy and protect everyone. In place of the Igsem, and Ms Yatori...!」 In a realm where no one but him can step into, Torway Remeon struggled alone at the expense of grinding his very soul. Only the vermillion hair burned into his eyes was his only spiritual support.



「... Sir.」

There was a sound, but the man ignored it.

「... Sir, Brigadier General Sir.」

That person kept calling him, but the man didn't answer. He was tricking himself into thinking that the person being called wasn't him and was adamant on ignoring it. However...

「Brigadier General Sazarf Sir!」

The voice shouted his name loudly into his ear, shattering his delusion.

「You are dealing with military documents here! This is the personal chamber of a General-grade officer, but this is still a base, please pull yourself together!」

「――」

When he snapped out of it, the man's vision quickly returned to reality. This is a room with a desk and filing cabinet, a luxury room that even had a bed for a nap. A female officer with the epaulette of a Lieutenant Colonel was standing before him. She was his adjutant, a subordinate.

「... Impossible. Frankly, this is impossible...」

Even with reality right before his face, Brigadier General Sazarf still scoffed at it. He was hoping to dispel the day dream by saying 「impossible」. But the scene before him continued to admonish him.

「What are you muttering!? Get a hold of yourself!」

「... Ughh... Guu...」

「You should know who you are! You are Imperial Army Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf, a high ranking officer of the Imperial military! 」

「I-I can't hear you, I can't hear you! I can't hear anything～!」

Sazarf drowned out the other person with his loud voice, got out of his chair and duck under his desk. His action which looked like a child who was afraid of lightning struck Lieutenant Colonel Melza dumbfounded, and she sighed softly.

「...Sir...」

「Impossible! A Brigadier is of the General-grade! At worst, I can accept being a Field-grade officer, but not General-grade! I never imagined this in all my life! Hey, god, enough already! Send me back down the correct path at the crossroad!」 The man ranted shamelessly. But the deflated words from under the desk were still rejected mercilessly by his adjutant.

「There is no turning back, this is your life now! Don't regress to a child and accept reality, Brigadier General Sazarf! The famed hero of the northern territories war!」

「Don't call me that! What do they expect of someone who didn't receive proper officer training from the Military Academy!?」

He retorted with his hands on his ears. The path he took in the past few years against his will flashed across Sazarf's mind and vanished.

「Northern territories... That's right, that is the beginning of everything. If I didn't volunteer to rear guard duty during the withdrawal... No, before that, if I didn't get cocky because they call me their best commander...」

As she looked at him mumbling 「If I... what if?」 repeatedly, Lieutenant Colonel Melza thought for a moment before speaking to him.

「Was that how you got to know the members of the 『Knights Corp』? No matter how many times I hear that, I feel so envious. My subordinates have never trusted me so much before.」

「It's an illusion, an illusion… Because they keep running into black-hearted superiors, they overestimate me since I take care of my subordinates normally...」

He finally sounded like he was going to cry. Sazarf timidly touched the epaulette on his shoulder and continued ranting:

「Why does everyone want to force the incredibly mediocre Sazarf to be a General? To prop me up high, expose my flaws and hang me out to dry? I'm already a fish on a chopping board? The next step is to fillet me? Is that it? I'm going to die?」

The man's monologue started turning masochistic, and Lieutenant Colonel Melza said sternly.

「If you say their trust in you is a mistake, then isn't now the chance for you to make that mistake a reality?」

Sazarf who was hiding under the desk shut his mouth. With that silence as a start, his adjutant continued to persuade him.

「They are having a hard time. A few of them will show up on base from time to time, but the air about them is getting gloomier. The two pillars supporting the group —ー one is lost forever, and there is no telling if the other can ever recover. And this is the most trying time for the Empire in the past millennium… It won't be a surprise if they lose their drive.」

Sazarf ground his teeth. His emotion had gone beyond masochistic and was now anger at his own incompetence.

「... I couldn’t do anything to help them. It’s always been like this. It took everything I had to give them cover support, and the crucial parts are left to them. It has always been this way since the northern territories war...」

「I don’t think so. Even from the resurrection of the 『Rising Sun Regiment』, there had been several times when the situation would have collapsed without you. And General Shiba won’t promote an incompetent man. You are here because your talent has been recognized, Brigadier General Sazarf.」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza refuted Sazarf’s self-evaluation. Since he was depressed because of his own incompetence, then she had to change that perspective of his.

「I will support you with all I can. I have served as General Shiba’s adjutant for a long time and can help make up for your lack of experience. If there’s anything you are unsure about, I will give you an answer.」

She took action at this moment, going around the desk to push away the chair, then offering her hand.

「So let’s work hard together, Sazarf Sir!」

Sazarf slowly raised his gaze. Ever since he met the members of the Knights Corp, he had pitifully lacked the pride to reject a sincere hand offered out to him.

「... I can’t imagine how I can treat you like my subordinate...」

「You have never tried it before, so you can’t imagine anything good. Enough, stand up! Half of the General-grade officer’s work is to hold the fort at the base! If you look the part, then that’s already 50 points! Give it a try before you worry about it, come!」

Lieutenant Colonel Melza firmly held his hand to pull him up. Sazarf stood up with resignation, while Lieutenant Colonel Melza

motivated herself before him— It seems her superior officer this time would be a handful.



The sound of the lecturer scribbling on the blackboard persisted for the entire class before the bell announcing noon was rang.

「— Good, that's all for class today. Remember to read up on the next lesson when you go back.」

Once he said that, the Officer Cadets all stood up and saluted. The atmosphere relaxed when the lecturer left, and the students started chatting.

They walked to the mess hall with their friends, leaving a woman behind by herself.

「... Sigh...」

This is the same as usual. Warrant Officer Suya Mittokarifu, who was enrolled into the Officer Cadet Academy after being exempted from the examination, watched the other cadets leave before exiting the classroom with a sigh.

「... What should I do now?」

Normally, she would head to the mess hell to eat, but if she went over with the crowd there, she would look out of place since she didn't have any friends. She had to go over when the crowd was gone and find a place to kill time before then.

「I borrowed my book too... let's head outside.」

With a book she loaned from the Historic Record Library in her bag, she decided to spend her time with this make-shift friend. After going through the exit, she went to the back of the school building, and sat on a bench there. The sports field was in front of her and she could see recruits marching while they endured their hunger.

「Hah... What will become of me in the future?」

Suya muttered to no one in particular. For the past two years— More accurately speaking, since she got transferred midway into the Officer Cadet Academy a year and 6 months earlier, she spent her time learning military knowledge in silence. With her experience as a Non-Commissioned Officer, she performed better than her peers at commanding troops. However, that created a gulf between her and the other cadets instead.

They saw Suya as an eyesore after she was exempted from the enrolment exam, but her capabilities made it hard for others to mock her. More importantly, there were rumours that she had the Empress' backing — All these elements combined ostracized Suya Mittokarifu in the Officer Cadet School.

「—You seemed depressed.」

「What?」

She heard a voice in her ears while she was concentrating on a book under the blue sky. Suya turned back with a start, and saw a petite girl with tanned skin. Her blouse was short, her skirt didn't reach her knees, and her dark plaited hair all showed that she was from the mountain tribe found in the north end of the Empire.

「If I was an assassin, I would have killed you. You are too careless, Suya.」

It took Suya almost ten seconds to recover from the surprise of seeing this unexpected person:

「Nanak Dar...? What are you doing here!」



「Since I’m standing right here, that means I came to visit you.」

Nanak said nonchalantly. Without waiting for Suya to recover from her confusion, she sat down on the bench without even greeting her.

「I heard you enrolled in school. Is your school work progressing smoothly?」

「Huh...? H-Hard to tell, but I have been officially promoted to Warrant Officer...」

「Why are you stuttering, not happy about your promotion?」

In the face of her relentless questions, Suya took some time to explain how she felt.

「... I thought I would end my career as a Non-Commissioned Officer, so the promotion chance surprised me… Besides, I didn’t plan to climb up further in my career as a soldier.」

「But you still got promoted. And your pay have increased too, right?」

「That’s true.」

When Nanak pointed that out so plainly, Suya wasn’t sure what was troubling herself. Suya realized the difference between her sensibility and Nanak’s. Nanak said quietly.

「— I heard the red one is dead.」

Suya was silent. Those words echoed mercilessly inside the hole in her chest.

「I already heard about that a long time ago. I wanted to rush over to check, but after the coup two years ago, the surveillance on us became stricter. To avoid them suspecting the Shinnack Tribe, I had to stay obediently for two years. I had to go through a lot of troublesome matters to come here today.」

Nanak snorted in complaint. At this point, she remembered something and added with a smile:

「I think you are worried too, but Yunakura province is relatively peaceful. We didn't have any major clashes with the local Imperial citizens, and the cultivation of corn is going smoothly. That Tetzirich is really capable, making our lives more convenient in all sorts of ways. Recently, we have started growing white grains... known as rice. I heard it's to earn money by selling grains that yield a lot of profit.」

Reporting the situation of the place they lived together in the past was her way of showing her concern. This made Suya feel a little better.

「— So, the red one is dead, what about Ikuta?」

Even so, she didn't deviate from the topic. Suya shook her head in resignation.

「...I haven't seen him.」

「What?」

「It's true. Two years ago, the reigning Empress... Empress Chamille kept him in her palace. From what I heard, the Regimental Commander had not come out once. I applied several times for permission to visit him, but all of them had been rejected.」

Suya told her the truth with fist clenched on her knees. Nanak frowned suspiciously.

「That small blondie Chamille? She abducted Ikuta and hid him away?」

Her choice of words made Suya check her surroundings frantically.

「Please, call her Your majesty, Nanak... People from this base had been executed because they insulted Her Majesty.」

This wasn't a light hearted topic. When Suya told her that, Nanak pouted.

「— How annoying.」

「It can’t be helped even if you find it annoying. Without Her Majesty’s permission, we can’t enter the palace.」

Suya told her with a sigh, she knew it herself too. She can’t meet Ikuta— To escape from that reality, she had devoted herself to studying and training until this day.

「I came all the way here and have to go back without meeting him? Has anyone you know met with Ikuta?」

「Even if you tell me that... I heard the members of the 『Knights Corp』 would occasionally get the chance to meet him.」

「Then, let’s find one of them to try. I will negotiate myself.」

Nanak got up from the bench after saying that and Suya quickly grabbed her shoulders.

「W-Wait, Nanak! Even if you got permission, it will definitely cause trouble if you walk around the base by yourself!」

「Why don’t you come too? You want to meet Ikuta too, right?」

「Well...」

Her forthright question made her dumbstruck. With no regards for how she felt, the Shinnack Tribe girl said without hesitation:

「I want to meet him. That’s all I think about these past two years.」

Suya bit her lips and lowered her head, envious of how honest Nanak was.

「— You want to meet Ikuta-san…?」

The two of them searched around the base and happened to find Haroma Becker. When Suya relayed Nanak’s request. Haroma fell silent troublingly.

「I want to help... But even us could only see him a handful of times. I’m not sure if Her Majesty will agree if Nanak-san tagged along...」

So that was the problem after all? Suya hung her head. Even so, Nanak still pressed stubbornly:

「How’s Ikuta? I heard his leg got seriously wounded, has he recovered?」

「He has recuperated from his wounds, but his left thigh was pierced by an arrow... It might look fine from the outside, but there might be pain or lingering effects.」

「Why are you being so vague? If you want to know if it hurts, why don’t you ask him?」

Nanak asked directly, and Haro shook her head with a gloomy face.

「... Even if I asked, he won’t answer.」

「What did you say?」

「No matter what we ask or say, he won’t answer. For the past two years, no one who has met Ikuta-san had a conversation with him… that’s probably true for Her Majesty too.」

Nanak turned pale when she heard that. She grabbed Haro’s shoulders and asked:

「—Haroma. Please ask that little blondie for me. If Ikuta is in that state, then I won’t go back unless I can see him...!」

「I-If it’s just a request, I can do that if you wait a few days… But like I said, I can’t guarantee whether Her Majesty will agree.」

「I don’t care if she agrees! If she won’t let me see Ikuta, then I will sneak into the palace...!」

「Nanak, don’t say that! Think about your position as the Tribal Chief!」

Suya couldn't ignore that and grabbed Nanak's arm to admonish her. Nanak snapped out of it and bit her lips.

「... You are right, I can't be rash. Thank you, Suya.」

Nanak smiled weakly at her, which made Suya realize two things. First, Nanak had opened herself to Suya more than she expected. Two, her days spent worrying about Ikuta's safety had ground away Nanak's heart.

「Haroma, I want to amend my earlier request — I'm not asking this as Nanak Dar, the individual. I'm seeking an audience with Her Majesty as the Chief of the Shinnack Tribe. Could you tell that to Empress Chamille?」

Nanak bowed her head deeply and begged her. She had been forced to deal with many changes over the past two years, and had learned how to put aside her pride and ask for help.



「...Ugh...」

The fourth day after he returned to the Central Base. With the sun shining in from the west, Matthew stirred from his bed, his body heavy from fatigue.

「...Tsu, what time is it?」

「Three twenty two PM. You woke up in the morning, but returned to sleep right away.」

His Sprite partner Tsu answered. The pudgy youth sat up on his bed and scratched his head in the Field-grade Officer single room that lacked any decoration.

「... I slept for really long, even though it's an off day.」

Matthew was really tired and received a week of vacation. He sensed that Haro probably asked Her Majesty to grant him a

vacation. To be honest, that was a god send. If he took on another mission in that mental state, he couldn't imagine what kind of mistake he would make.

「I'm hungry, but I don't want to stay on base… Let's take a stroll on the streets.」

Matthew quickly washed up and changed, then left without his Wind Gun — His shoulders felt light when he walked. That was a feeling he had not felt for some time.

He was searching for a carriage heading into the capital at the station when someone covered his eyes from behind.

「Heehee! Guess who am I—」 「Woaaahh?」

His body pounced forward on reflex to evade. After rolling on the ground to face his back, he saw a dumbstruck woman standing there.

「S-Sorry! I didn't know you will be so surprised.」

She had tanned skin and a crossed scar on her right cheek. The pudgy youth would never forget that face and he opened his eyes wide.

「—You are Pommy? Naval Lieutenant Polminue?」

The named person smiled cheerfully. The Imperial Naval First Grade Lieutenant Polminue Jurgus was standing right there.

「Long time no see, fatty. You have gotten thinner, have you been well?」

「Y-Yes, not bad… But, what are you doing here?」

「It's only natural for you to ask. I'm here for work, and she is just tagging along.」

A flirty male voice interjected. When he saw the person behind Pommy, Matthew immediately straightened his back.

「—Admiral Erynphin Jurgus! L-Long time no see!」

「Well well, it’s been a while, Second Lieutenant Matthew. No, you are a Major now? Young people who follow the trend grow really fast.」

「T-Thank you. But for the Admiral to visit personally...」

This was a rare event which confused the slightly plump youth. Admiral Jurgus shrugged with a wry smile.

「It’s a pain～ I will go say hi to Terushinha and old man Shiba before seeking an audience at the palace. It’s been a busy year, so I don’t have the chance to send my regards to the Empress, so I want to make up for it with this trip.」

「And I will be accompanying the Admiral. Heehee, aren’t I amazing?」

「It is customary for attendants to accompany me, I don’t care whether they are cats or strawmans. But out of my 4 attendants, you are the only one who got in by drawing the winning lot.」

I see. When Admiral Jurgus revealed what happened behind the scenes, Matthew thought — As a descendent of Captain Garciev, she used the luck she was born with to secure the ticket to Central.

Switching his gaze between his niece and Matthew, Admiral Jurgus averted his face with a smile.

「I change my mind— Pommy, I order you to act independently, and carefully find out the details of how the army has changed over the past two years from Major Matthew. This will benefit you greatly. An officer in his position can show you the actual operations most clearly.」

The unexpected proposal made Matthew stare with his eyes wide. Before he could speak, The boss of the Pirate Navy looked at his three subordinates behind him and said:

「We just need three people here. I will treat them to a good meal, and you will meet up with us back at base tomorrow afternoon. Understand?」

「Aye aye, Admiral! Naval First Grade Lieutenant Polminue Jurgus, will now act independently!」

Pommy accepted it unquestioningly, so Admiral Jurgus' group briskly walked towards the base. Matthew watched them leave blankly while Pommy said cheerfully:

「— Where shall we go, Matthew? This is actually my first time in the capital.」

Matthew and Pommy got on a carriage towards the capital. He couldn't think of a good route to show her around, so he decided to take her to the restaurant with the best dishes that he knew about.

「This is it. The place isn't that clean but...」

The smell of spice lingered in the air of the crowded restaurant. The sun was still up, but the patrons at the dining table were already drunk. Pommy looked around the rowdy place and sighed in relief.

「Hmm, so the bars around here aren't too different, I got nervous for nothing. I thought you will take me to a more high class restaurant.」

「The Officer mess hall is much quieter. Want to take a look?」

「That's where all the top wigs of the army gather, right? No way I will go.」

Me too. Matthew answered with a wry smile after hearing her forthright response. Feeling relaxed for the first time in a while, the pudgy youth picked a random empty table and sat down opposite Pommy .

「Sigh, there are many new faces in the group of big shots... All the officers formerly from the Igsem faction all took a step back from

the top postings, and Field Marshal Igsem is now an Honorary Field Marshal with no real authority. He took on the post of Empress Chamille's assistant in military affairs.」 He was about to take a swig of the beer that was served but stopped himself. He moved his mug towards Pommy, and she tapped her mug on his with a smile.

「Anyway, cheers. I never thought you will come to the centre of the continent.」 「Me too, it's great that you are still alive.」

After cheering to their reunion, they started drinking. Feeling the alcohol seep into his tired stomach, Matthew took a breath before continuing:

「...Phew. So, Empress Chamille has control of the army both in name and in practice. She is literally using her authority over the military, and no one can complain about it. General Shiba and General Remeon are both working directly under Her Majesty, but General Shiba has a stronger presence for now. General Remeon's ambition and drive seems to be lacklustre recently.」

「That's roughly the same as what we heard. To return the favour, I can tell you that the Navy is very peaceful. Ever since that incident with Naval Commander Kanron, the Navy has been keeping a close eye on internal affairs, but everything is the same as usual. From the perspective of the boss, he doesn't think much about the coup in the capital.」

Pommy thinking everything is the same as usual made Matthew shrug with a sigh.

「To be honest, I'm envious of such a never changing situation… The past two years has been very volatile for us, be it the military or the government, the head of various departments keeps changing.」

He looked down at the foam on his beer and continued calmly:

「This is the fifth serious revolt we have to put down. This time, it was started by a soldier from an old famous house of the warring era, but before that, they were started by Governors whose vested

interests were harmed by Her Majesty's policies — and manipulated by the nobles. It's probably the same this time too… After the background investigation is done, more heads will roll.」

「Whenever there is unrest, the Empress will send you to the frontlines as a key appointment officer? That's amazing!」

Pommy was genuinely happy for his active performance. But Matthew shook his head quietly in response to her smile.

「... It's tiring. Because I'm alone in that battlefield.」

Her hand moving the mug to her mouth froze and Pommy stared right at him. The youth cut the mutton served to him and muttered quietly:

「That wasn't the case two years ago. I had comrades who were better than me, and I just needed to fight alongside them. We could discuss the allocation of tasks and help each other when a problem arises. We were lucky to get a good superior officer...」

Reminiscing the scenes which were now lost forever, Matthew's eyes turned gloomy.

「But it's different now. I have my own subordinates. The Staff Officers older than me aren't enemies, but not allies either. The Empress refused to open up to me. And Torway… It's been a while since I last chatted with him properly. Although he will support my proposals during war conferences.」

Pommy seriously listened to everything the youth said. At this moment, Matthew realized he was the only one talking. He shut up and finished his beer.

「—Sorry, I just felt like ranting. You want to ask about the changes within the army, right? What I said isn't really a report.」

「It's fine, it's fine, go on.」

Pommy urged with a serious face. She didn't want him to hold back.

「Continue, it's fine to rant or talk about anything, I'm here to listen to you, Matthew.」

At the same time, two women were inside the waiting room of the Palace's Deep Green Hall, waiting for their turn to an audience.

「What's wrong, Suya? Your shoulders are shaking.」

「B-Because... I never thought I will get a chance to see Her Majesty so quickly...」

Suya checked her uniform again and couldn't calm down — After asking Major Haroma to send in the request, things progressed quickly, and the audience was set within a few days. It was what she had hoped for, but she wasn't mentally prepared yet.

「The sooner, the better. I have the problem of not being clear in my explanation, so I hope you can help me with that.」

「I'm not confident too! You might not know, but when speaking in court一一 there are protocols you have to follow...!」

As they chatted, a martial officer ordered them to enter. Suya gasped while Nanak scowled her eyes as they followed the martial officer. The two of them passed through the last set of doors and entered the Grand Courtyard, on the red carpet leading to the throne was a decapitated man.

「—That thing will get in the way of the audience. Clean it up, Lucanti.」

「Yes!」

The Empress ordered coldly and the female knight in charge of the Royal Guards, Captain Lucanti Hargunska, picked up the corpse. With the body on her right shoulder and the head in her left hand, the corpse of a noble in extravagant attire was carried out of the Grand Courtyard.

「——」 「......」

The first scene they saw after entering froze Suya and Nanak's feet. One of the martial officers waved them over anxiously, and they managed to collect themselves to move forward.

「— G-Greetings, Your Majesty.」

I have come to a scary place. Her staunch belief made her voice shook as Suya genuflected before the Empress. Nanak quickly mimicked her.

「Shinnack Tribal Chief Nanak Dar and Warrant Officer Suya Mittokarifu? At ease, raise your head.」

It would be easier for her to keep her head down. Suya thought as she looked up timidly at her Monarch.

「L-L-Long live Your Majesty —」

「Save your slip short pleasantries, don't do things you are not used to.」

The Empress dismissed her nonchalantly. She seized the initiative and spoke to Suya who was spooked:

「Are you doing well in the Academy, Mittokarifu Warrant Officer? You should be taking charge of your training platoon now.」

「Y-Yes! Thanks to the support of Your Majesty, I got this golden opportunity...!」

「Good, then work hard so you can serve in the frontlines soon. You might have risen through the ranks, but you are Solork's disciple. I have more expectations of you then the other Officer Cadets.」

When she heard that, Suya realized that the girl was like her guardian. Being too fearful of someone who was supporting you would be rude. However — she thought her reaction was justified after seeing that corpse.

「Well then—Nanak Dar. This audience seems to be your request.」

Chamille shifted her gaze to the side and asked. Nanak looked back at her and asked:

「That's correct. As the chief of the Shinnack Tribe, I'm here to learn what Your Majesty thinks.」

「My thoughts? I will answer it if I can, what do you wish to know?」

「First, what does Your Majesty plan to do with us?」

She was asking as a representative of her Tribe. The Empress answered without missing a beat:

「—Are your lives in Yunakura province going well?」

「For now.」

「Then, I don't require anything of you. Just don't start any pointless scuffles and live in peace. Some of the past Emperors detested the Shinnack Tribe, but I'm not one of them. If you don't harm the Empire, I will guarantee your basic rights as a citizen.」

Empress stated her reasonable plans for the Shinnack Tribe. With half her worries cleared, Nanak bowed in gratitude.

「... As the tribal chief, I'm thank you for Your Majesty's kindness.」

「Your taxes will be the same as other citizens. If you don't manage your lives properly, your tribe will starve. Don't forget that.」

Empress Chamille added sternly, her gaze suddenly turning icy.

「Enough about that. You two are here to request a meeting with Solork, right?」

She got right to the point, which made Suya and Nanak hold their breath. Since Major Haroma made the request on their behalf, it was only natural for her to relay their goal too. The two of them answered with silence, waiting for her to go on.

「Not granted, that's my only answer.」

The Empress concluded unhappily without any ground for negotiation.

「M-May I ask for the reason?」

Suya could instinctively tell that Nanak would go berserk if she kept quiet, so she asked instead. The Empress responded without beating a brow:

「Ikuta Solork belongs to me. There are no other answer to that question.」

「—When did Ikuta become yours?」

The female Shinnack hero's patience was running out, and it was clear from her fiery tone. Chamille showed a cruel smile she was very familiar with in response to the agitated Nanak.

「You don't understand, Nanak Dar? I will tell you then. The moment I ascended the throne, everything in this Empire belongs to me. Even the lives of you two.」

She was clearly abusing her authority as the monarch to shut Nanak and Suya up. Showing the face she made when Naian Mitokazuruku accused her of inhumane actions, the Empress continued:

「I will decide what I want to do with my property. So I forbid you from meeting Solork. As for the reason— Right, I'm just not in the mood. I won't ask you to accept it, since that is your only choice anyway.」

「— You!」

The enraged Nanak was about to stand up when Suya pressed her shoulders down desperately — 「That action will lead to death」.

Sensing this message from the intense force in Suya's fingers, the Shinnack Tribal Chief forcibly suppressed her emotions.

「... You... What are you trying to do by imprisoning Ikuta? I heard after that red one —Yatorishino Igsem died, he won't respond to the words of anyone. Isn't that true for you too?」

The air within the Grand Courtyard was trembling. After hearing that, the Empress' eyes changed prominently.

「For your own safety, let me give you some advice — be really careful when you mention Yatori's name before me. Even if I don't intend to, my mouth might order your execution on the spur of the moment.」

The girl in a black coat glared at Nanak, with emotions raging like lava in her eyes, her fingers digging into the armrest on her throne — But that only lasted an instant. The Empress took a deep breath and quickly concealed her emotions under her cold smile.

「As for Solork's illness, I don't have any obligations to tell you. I can only say his condition has been stabilized, and he is receiving the best medical treatment the Empire can offer.」

「That's not an answer. I'm asking what you plan to do by imprisoning Ikuta —!」

Nanak wanted to press on, but Empress Chamille deepened the crack-like smile on her face.

「Don't get cocky, Nanak Dar. I have no qualms about ravaging a minor tribe already on the verge of extinction.」

The Empress' words had a crazed sense of seriousness, and Nanak didn't say anything more. Seeing both Suya and her were now silent, the Empress decided the discussion was finished.

「End the audience. There are others waiting after you, dismissed.」

After the two of them left, a tall and handsome man stepped into the Grand Courtyard to take their place.

「Greetings, Your Majesty— Did Your majesty bullied the two girls that passed me by?」

Admiral Erynphin Jurgus genuflected respectfully as he questioned the Empress on the throne. Ignoring his impudence, Empress Chamille nodded sagely.

「That's right. Does the Boss of the Pirate Navy feel adverse to serving a monarch who bullies little girls?」

「No such thing. Being sadistic is the hobbies of monarchs — you really take after your father in that aspect.」

The second salvo was clear sarcasm. The girl who had calmed down felt enraged, glaring at the officer before her in an attempt to burn him to crisp with her eyes.

「— It will tarnish my name if I execute you here.」

「It's wonderful that you realize that, Your Majesty. You might not know, but that's how we Jurgus have always been.」

Admiral Jurgus declared fearlessly. Sensing that his attitude was his means of self-introduction, the Empress grunted.

「You will serve, but not butter up your masters? Is that the so-called pride of pirates? — A bunch of thugs.」

In the end, that's how Admiral Jurgus, the head of the Katjvarna Pirate navy, was. Accepting this fact, she slowly suppressed her seething rage.

「Fine, I will spare you. It will be a pity to lose the fun of taming you.」

「I'm impressed, Your Majesty.」

Admiral Jurgus said without any sarcasm this time. His eyes were shining as he evaluated his new monarch.



「... Ughh...」

「A-Are you alright? You can lean on me, here, walk slowly.」

Supporting Matthew who was stumbling, Pommy walked down a crowded street in the Capital.

They got pumped up after drinking at the first bar and would stop for a drink whenever they passed by another bar. Matthew finally hit his limits at the fourth bar.

「The ground is incredible… It's spinning round and round...」

「You are drinking too fast, you will throw up if you get on a carriage.」

Pommy said as she scanned the area.

「W-Want to find a place to rest? Look, there's an inn nearby.」

The youth didn't answer, but Pommy forcefully interpret his silent as consent and continued:

「I-It's decided then! Ehh~ Which one should we choose —」

Abusing Matthew's lack of resistance, she kept progressing the conversation. Pommy rushed to the innkeeper inside the first inn she saw and handed a stack of notes over.

「Double room, one night! I will pay upfront with this!」

「P-Please enjoy your stay.」

A really hyped up customer was here. The innkeeper stared with his eyes wide open and ushered them to their room.

「Huff～! Puff～!...」

After going into the room, Pommy headed into the bathroom to take off her clothes and splash water onto herself with a pail to wake herself up.

「... I really came in… What do I do...?」

She muttered to herself in a trembling voice. Act first and worry later, for someone like her who lives life to the fullest be it good or

bad, this was the norm. Act first— Not think carefully before acting, act first, think later. This reckless and aggressive nature was only natural for the Jurgus bloodline.

「D-Don't be scared! This is going just as planned, yes!」

Pommy pinched her cheeks and suppressed her timid feelings. It was fine to rush like this too, Pommy tried to convince herself— there wasn't much chance for her in the navy to meet Matthew who was in the army, so it's only natural she wanted to progress as much as possible. I will support you, go as far as you can. Didn't her uncle hint that with his eyes?

「... That's right. The next time we meet, it won't be a surprise if either of us died...」

She had to live a life without regret even if she died tomorrow. After she survived her first battle, she naturally thought that way. Even if she ignored that, having a wishy-washy romance wasn't the style for women of the sea.

「—Good!」

She pulled herself together, put on her clothes and took a few deep breaths to calm herself down. Pommy resolved herself and returned to the room where the youth was waiting.

「—I-I'm back! Sorry for taking so long. Are you feeling better?」

She tried so hard to sound natural that it came out stiff instead. With the oil lamp illuminating the room, Matthew was still looking at the ceiling blankly from his bed.

「...Yes, a little… Sorry for the trouble, even though it's a rare trip to the capital for you...」

「Don't mention it, I was in your care in the sea.」

Pommy answered and sat down on the youth's bed as it was only natural. Normally, Matthew would be panicking by now, but he was too drunk. Unaware of the situation he was in, he slowly said:

「... The sea? That did happen.」

「That's right. Or rather, I caused a lot of trouble at the start… I never properly apologized to you and it has always been on my mind. 」

Pommy naturally spilled her true feelings as they chatted. Everything was frantic when they first met, but now that they thought about it, it was really nostalgic.

「I'm sorry for bullying you like an idiot when you boarded the ship. To be honest — I was envious. You are around my age, but you already made several achievements and were treated like heroes. I didn't want to lose out to you, at least on the sea, so I acted really lofty and detestable... I'm really sorry.」

If she didn't apologize, this wouldn't go anywhere. She sincerely wished to apologize for torturing the youth in the past. After a moment of silence, Matthew answered seriously:

「... You asked me to climb the mast to take down the ropes tying the sail down.」

「Sorry...」

「You forced me to eat raw fish. When I went to dinner, there was only a slab of raw fish on the plate. What's the excuse again? To avoid scurvy?」

「...... I'm really sorry...」

「What did you call me back then? I can't recall, can you repeat that?」

「...... Meanie...」

Pommy lowered her head with tears in her eyes. Seeing her shoulders trembled slightly, Matthew stopped teasing her and smiled awkwardly.

「I'm sorry for letting it get into my head… the past is past. Ikuta said — blaming the ones who made mistakes wouldn't solve

anything. You did make a mistake, but you have reflected on it adequately, so that's good enough.」

He spoke frankly to a comrade who had gone through life and death battles with him. If not for her, Matthew would have already drowned in the bottom of the ocean.

「That aside, it was tough after that battle ended… Because Ikuta was injured in the earliest skirmish, I had to attend the War Conference on his behalf. I was so nervous when I had to give a speech to Admiral Jurgus and other high-ranking Naval officers… I'm not confident at all, but Ikuta still recommended me, and Yatori had no objections...」

As he chatted with Pommy, his memories started to turn clear. The nostalgia circulated around Matthew's body along with the alcohol.

「Those two were good at tricking people and had excellent teamwork. Even if I didn't bite, they would somehow spur my intrigue and make me give it a try. Maybe that was why I felt happy when they acknowledged my work. More than my superior officer or the Empress... That made me happier than anything else.」

The youth poured his heart out like he had never done before — and his voice started to waver.

「But— Why did you die?」

Pommy turned her head in bated breath and saw the deep emptiness piercing Matthew's chest.

「Yatori— Why did you die? Ikuta— Why didn't you come back? Without you two… Who can I boast my achievements to? Who's back should I chase after?」

Tears rolled down his eyes and the youth covered his face with his arms — He didn't recover at all. These two short years wasn't enough for him to accept the reality. A cold breeze blew through the hole that couldn't be filled after he lost the vermillion haired girl.

「I have been chasing you— chasing your backs! Not just me, Torway, Haro and the princess too, they all followed you all the way! Advancing under your lead! — B-But in the end!」

「Matthew...」

Pommy couldn't say anything else. Anything besides silence had been sealed. She realized that the sadness tormenting the youth before her wasn't something she could heal.

「— Damn it. I'm the only one there. Without you guys, I'm all alone.」

Matthew moaned like a child abandoned by his parents. Unable to find the words to refute that, Polminue could only lean onto him.



After the audience with Admiral Erynphin Jurgus, Chamille's schedule duties ended for the time being. She and her escorting martial officers left the Deep Green Hall, and headed to a grand building deeper within the restricted grounds — the harem famous for being the residence of the Emperor's concubines.

「— I will visit the harem for a while. Maintain the security within the palace.」

「Yes, my liege.」

The leader of the royal guard, Captain Lucanti Hargunska answered immediately. She started escorting her monarch back to her chambers and took charge of the security.

They reached the entrance of the harem after passing through the corridors of the restricted zone, and the royal guards stopped. Aside from those residing here or assigned to take care of chores inside, only the Empress was permitted to enter. Lucanti, who would escort the Empress back to her room, was the only exception.

With the sounds of the heavy doors closing behind them, the Empress and her knight walked down the passageway of the harem. The carvings on the walls were extravagant and delicate, but there weren't any other art pieces here. The artwork that used to decorate the halls in the past had been sold by the new Empress to secure funds.

Not just the artwork. There weren't any concubines in the harem at all. The beautiful women gathered from all over the Empire by the previous Emperor had been dismissed. In their place, one man moved in — that man was in no way handsome or the male version of a concubine, but he was special to Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik.

「Lucanti.」

「Yes.」

As they walked along the corridor that offered a wide field of vision, the Empress suddenly spoke. Her knight Lucanti straightened her back and listened.

「Are you regretting it?」

The unexpected question made her open her eyes wide. Seeing that she was confused, Chamille added:

「I mean following me two years ago. Ever since I appointed you as my personal escort, I have ordered you to perform all sorts of filthy acts. Tasks that are shameful compared to your proud late brother.」

The Empress said plainly and stopped to turn to her knight. She had a cruel smile that seemed to be mocking Lucanti's loyalty.

「Recently… There are even people calling you the 『Decapitating Knight』.」

That ominous title entered her ears. Lucanti thought about that and shook her head firmly.

「My movements had gotten more practiced, but I don't think I have been forced to do anything I detest.」

The smile was gone from the Empress' lips. Her golden eyes stared right into the knight's face.

「... Interesting, tell me what you think.」

「When I decapitate someone, the blood would spill onto my body. However, the responsibility for the bloodshed had all been borne by Your Majesty.」

Lucanti wasn't fazed by the oppressive aura and spoke her mind. There were few who could speak to the Empress so freely without forcing themselves.

「There's only one thing I'm sure of. Your Majesty Chamille is doing everything you can to protect the citizens of the Empire. Your

Majesty used methods that would be harsh and painful for anyone, and achieve your goals even if you get detested by the masses.」

Despite Chamille's sharp gaze, Lucanti was still smiling confidently. In contrast to the Empress, her smile was pure and innocent, without any hidden agenda.

「Since this hasn't changed since two years ago, there's nothing for me to regret.」

I see. Chamille was impressed and continued walking — no matter how she tried to shake her, the female knight remained steadfast. For the past two years, the Empress had felt plenty of times that Yatorishino Igsem assigning Lucanti to her seemed to be an inevitable conclusion.

When they reached a door deep inside the harem, the girl told the Knight without turning back:

「... Here will be fine. Don't let anyone pass this door.」

Lucanti readily acknowledged her monarch's usual request.

「Leave it to me, my liege. To be frank, instead of executions, I'm better at chasing away a fox.」

The female Knight said with strong conviction. Envious of her forthrightness, the Empress concealed her thoughts and disappeared behind the door.

In all the rooms prepared for the concubines, there would be a waiting room between the entrance and the living quarters. This arrangement was made for the Emperor and his concubines — so they wouldn't meet before the concubine's make up was done.

「— Phew.」

There was no meaning in this routine, but the girl still appreciated the chance to ready herself mentally. Her heart would always be pounding whenever she visits him.

「— I'm coming in, Solork.」

Once she had calmed down, she called out and stepped into the room. The unchanging scene she had seen several times appeared before her.

The room wasn't big, but it was still larger than a commoner's bedroom. The furniture was plain so the occupant could feel at peace.

There was a window deep in the room, but it didn't lead outside, and only to the courtyard. The windows couldn't offer a wide view due to safety concerns, and there was a garden with a variety of colours instead. During the day, the birds would fly into the courtyard and sing their songs.

The only resident of the harem was sitting on a bed by the window. His head was hanging down and his dark eyes looked at the courtyard blankly. He didn't react when the girl entered the room.

That was how Ikuta Solork had been for the past two years.

「Good Afternoon, Chamille, Shia. So you are here to visit him today too.」

The Luminous Sprite Kusu greeted the visitors on behalf of its master from the chair by the bed. Chamille smiled gently. This was the only place she would show her true feelings.

「Kusu, how's Solork?」

She said as she walked to the bed and sat on a chair too. Kusu shook its head quietly.

「He has been as quiet as yesterday. I can't talk to him today too.
」

Is that so? The girl quietly accepted the report repeated to her every time she visited. The friendly Luminous Sprite would always add a few more lines:

「But he ate today. Iced yogurt and fresh fruits are easier to swallow. Thanks to your repeated attempts, he isn't getting thinner. 」

「Great, I can't let Solork keep eating cold food that had gone through multiple round of testing for poison.」

Thinking back to her days in the palace, Chamille said with an awkward smile. With a sideway glance at her, Kusu called out to the other three Sprites in the room.

「Shia, Fune, Fio, come here too.」

「Understood.」

The Fire Sprite Shia crawled out of the girl's pouch in response to Kusu's call and walked across the floor. The water and wind sprite staying by the bed did the same. Aside from Shia, the rest of the Sprites were left here by the harem's servant for Ikuta's convenience.

「We will be in the waiting room like usual. Call us if you need some light.」

The Sprites moved to the waiting room to give them time alone. The room was quiet after they left, and Chamille thought about what to say for a while before speaking:

「... Does your leg hurt? Solork, I think it's a great weather to take a stroll in the courtyard.」 There was no answer. As usual, the girl changed topic and continued:

「Today, Nanak Dar and Suya Mittokarifu came to seek an audience to meet you, but I turned them down. Well… Would you like to meet either of them...?」

She said the news she was better off not saying out of guilt. Ikuta's face didn't change when he heard that.

「... What a stupid question. Let's talk about something else...」

Feeling disgusted that she felt relieved from that, the girl continued.

「— A few days ago, I returned after suppressing the revolt by Colonel Naian Mitokazuruku. Since the coup two years ago, this is the 5th major rebellion. He was holed up behind the solid defences of the Fortress City Garurujan and I had to resort to a brutal method to capture the fort early… I was admonished by General Shiba. He even compared me to the infamous『Lord Executioner』.」

Chamille made a face of self-mockery, then placed her hand on her knees with a deep sigh.

「Maybe he's right. To be honest, unlike that fearless general, Matthew is starting to fear me. Recently, there will be fear in his eyes when he looks at me… Although there is a part of him that is trying desperately to understand me.」

Chamille told him guiltily. All the depressing words she couldn't say when she was showing the face of an Empress.

「On the other hand, Torway seemed determined to follow me to the bitter end... He is definitely the one who changed the most over the past two years. His determination and attitude even reminded me of the Igsem from the past.」

Ikuta didn't say anything, and the girl continued speaking in spite of his silence:

「Right now, Haro is the one connecting them and the last reason they are staying with me. If I lose her... the 『Knights Corp』 might fall apart.」

She voiced her concerns with a hoarse voice. Her shoulders kept shaking when she spoke.

「Before I can defeat the enemy, I'm afraid of losing my own people. Isn't that funny, Solork? But that's only natural— for a

foolish monarch who chose a reign of terror to rebuild the wobbling order.」

She looked at the hands on her knee and saw the illusion that it was stained with blood.

「I already fell a lot of heads. Soldiers trying to revolt and nobles who are still refusing to let go of their privileges… Even the civilians who decided that things don't involve them. They are the subjects involved. Because they are the ones who need to take the lead and decide the future of this country.」

As if she was giving a confession, she kept speaking nonstop to no one in particular, then suddenly looked up at the youth with a weak smile.

「But, Solork... All these doesn't concern you anymore.」

Chamille's eyes were filled with despair. She knew better than anyone that he would be silent. She knew the gap would never be filled. That was why...

「I won't ask you for anything again. And so... you just need to stay here. You just need to witness my failures and struggles from behind — that will be enough. That's all I need.」

She got up from the chair and walked to the bed. Chamille stood before the man she locked into the cage and couldn't stop the trembling in her voice.

「Nanak Dar asked me what I'm planning to do by imprisoning you here. I have to suppress my urge to ask in return — what can I do? W-What can I...」

She leaned towards the bed and gently touched his face with the fingers on her right hand.

「Your heart will always belong to Yatori. So, I can at least have your body?」

She felt a strong urge to hold him in her arms, but the girl bit her lips to suppress that feelings of wild abandon.

「I can't do it. If I did— my unsightliness will make me crumble.」

She had to pull each of her fingers on his cheek and held the right hand of the youth to her chest with both arms.

「So... I just need one palm.」

The warmth from the palm had saved her life in the past. It swept away the darkness in her heart and gave her a glimpse of redemption in her future. For Chamille, this was a salvation just for her alone.

「Will you forgive me just for that? Forgive me for relying on your gentleness...」

A tear rolled down her cheeks and dropped onto the youth's arm.

No one answered the girl's pleas— time passed slowly within this cage.



Two days after the audience with Nanak Dar, 9pm.

At this moment, the person which the Empress hated the most had come to meet her. The Empress was seated on the Throne in the Jade Green Hall with murderous intent.

「— I never thought I would need to see your face so late at night.」

She showed her scorn for the man in front of her with her first words. But his smile didn't waver when he heard that.

「How strict, have I earn Your Majesty's wrath without realizing it?」

「What a joke. The only way you can please me is by writhing on the ground in excruciating pain.」

As his monarch cursed him, the Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma continued smiling cheerfully. From the coup two years ago until today — only this man didn't change the slightest as he continued to spread madness.

「......」

A killing intent as scorching as lava laid inside the Empress' eyes. She wanted to tear him to pieces and feed him to the dogs — For the next three years, she would need to suppress that urge whenever she met him. She had thought of many ways to get rid of that monster but had failed every time.

There are some who think that Chancellor Trisnai Izanma who abused his position as the caretaker of the previous Emperor would fall from power with the ascension of the Third Princess Chamille. After Chamille took the throne, she would officially gain the power and authority — but shortly after she took the throne, they realized that was too optimistic.

「—『To ensure a smooth political transition, the Imperial Chancellor may not be dismissed for 5 years after the passing of the late Emperor』. No matter how many times I think about this, it is all bull shit. The constitution of this country had become your scribbling book without me noticing.」

「Fufufu, please don't say that… In the first place, the reigning Emperor isn't allowed to change the laws set within five years of the previous Emperor's passing. This is a tradition to avoid any political chaos when power is passed to the next monarch, what's so strange about that?」 The fox said gleefully. And the truth was, this was the only authority that the previous Emperor could hold over Chamille. If she overturned the decision of the late Emperor, that would mean she was refuting her inheritance of the throne. For the Sprites watching the movement of the royals closely, that would be interpreted as a rebellious action.

「... What a joke. Is the existence of two Royal Sprites natural to you?」

「That's only natural. Like I said, part of the authority entrusted to me by the late Emperor is still in effect. The existence of the Royal Sprite is physical proof of that. Isn't it only logical for Your Majesty and I to both possess a Sprite?」 Chamille, the reigning Empress, and Trisnai, the caretaker who retained a part of the late Emperor's authority. In order to accept this unprecedented situation, they needed to discard the assumption that there would only be one Royal Sprite. The reigning Empress' partner— was the Fire Sprite Shia she inherited from the vermillion-haired girl, which had gained the powers of a Royal Sprite. At the same time, the old Royal Sprite with Trisnai still retained part of its functions.

「As long as your authority as the Chancellor remains intact, the insurance guaranteeing your life will still stand… It's incredibly annoying. You pulled out all the stops to save your own hide.」

The insurance referred to how the death of Trisnai Izanma, who served the dual role of Imperial Chancellor and Archbishop, would result in 「all Sprites in the Empire to cease activity」.

It was still not clear if this was a bluff and Chamille thought of many ways to assassinate him. She didn't put her plans into action because Royal Sprite had a wide standard of what counted as 「killing Trisnai」 and 「equivalent to killing him」.

From snatching Trisnai's Royal Sprite, covering his lips to stop him from speaking to the Royal Sprite, forcing him to act or speak involuntarily to restricting his freedom of movement, the Royal Sprite would deem all this as 「equivalent to killing him」 and give a warnings.

… Actually, Chamille didn't have to try these methods since Ikuta tested them all two years ago. He couldn't do anything about this, which was why he couldn't stop Trisnai from disrupting the war in

the end. In the past two years, the Empress had yet to discover a loophole in the fox's defences. On top of that, she had to grant him extra protection to prevent the Empire from dying along if he died by accident.

「I'm not doing this to save myself. As long as I draw breath, I will do my best to assist Your Majesty with your holy duties. That's why I'm still alive today.」

「You want to help me with my administrative duties? But I'm the one who wants to turn you into minced meat.」

The golden eyes were filled with killing intent. The fox swayed, enjoying that intimidating aura.

「Fufufu...! I'm not against showing my fealty to you, but that will have to wait. I have an urgent matter to report.」

「... Speak. I will only tolerate the unpleasantness of breathing the same air as you during your report.」

After the usual rant, Chamille urged his retainer to be quick, so Trisnai raised his head and said:

「I will make it short— we are almost at our limit in stalling for time.」

The corners of the Empress' eyes twitched. Trisnai raised his hands up before she said anything.

「Allow me to explain before any misunderstanding sets in. Our agents in Kioka is working hard and have incited several riots, causing severe political and military unrest in their nation.」

「That suits me just fine. Why not continue?」

Fighting poison with poison, the Empress wanted Trisnai to take part in the espionage activities against Kioka. Part of the agents on the ground worked under the fox two years ago. Aside from the agents' main objective, she arranged it this way to weaken Tristan's formidable influence within the Empire.

「I would very much like to, but I'm out of materials. Other than my spies, the agents sent by General Remeon and Field Marshal Igsem have all been committed to this, but two years in the limit. Their work will continue— but it will be difficult to incite an organized revolt. The most they can do now is to collect intel.」

「That's your report? You are here to disappoint me?」

The Empress' eyes were filled with contempt. At this moment, the fox spreaded out his arms dramatically.

「I wouldn't dare! Or rather, I'm here to report a great accomplishment.」

「— What?」 「For the past two years, Your Majesty has performed splendidly. First, you reunited the military that has split in three, using your strict authority to steady the army that was wavering from the fall of the Igsem. Whenever a soldier shows signs of ambition, you will display your might personally on the battlefield— exactly how a ruler should act. How can I not find joy in this? The mysterious bloodline of the Katjvarna has finally revived in you!」

Trisnai suddenly started a monologue, looking at the Empress with fervoured eyes and continued with glee:

「You handled domestic affairs wonderfully too. You mended the crippled government which has lost most of its cabinet ministers in such a short period of time. Promoting talented officials from the ranks, reorganizing the cabinet and putting in a policy to train future leaders— One misstep would have serious repercussions, but you managed to pull it off. This proves that you understand the structure and flaws of this nation as a whole.」

Fear ran down Chamille's spine. She understood he wasn't just offering compliments out of pleasantries, which made it even more unbearable and unpleasant.

「I met this monster's expectation.」

Just that thought made her wish she could undo her work from the past two years.

「You went all out to procure funds too. Aside from confiscating the wealth of corrupt nobles, you also sold most of the royal family's treasures too. The money was used to reorganize the government and the military, and given out generously to the kin of fallen soldiers. Your Majesty has a great sense of priority! The world runs on money— all the more reason to keep a tight leash on the troops!」

Trisnai gave lavish praise to the Empress with no regards for her feelings. He was evaluating her with his compliments, stating how well the girl had fulfilled the role of the ideal ruler in his mind.

「Changing Governors who made embezzlement a norm, increasing the efficiency in tax collection. The draconian law of executing those who criticize Your Majesty served two purposes, restoring discipline and making it clear who the ruler is.」

「— Shut up, fox! All these measures only cure the symptoms but not the cause!」

Tired of his speech, the Empress shouted:

「The prosperity right now is just the effect of the reign of terror. Just a temporary calm held together by my threats. That's only natural since the structure of the nation remained unchanged. The military and political stability are maintained by my own prowess— don't you understand how unstable this situation is? For example, imagine me pressing down the covers of two pots of water. The boiling water will spill out if I relax my hands, but even if I don't, the pressure will still build up over time. If we keep doing the same thing without thinking about it, it won't be long before we get scalded all over!」

The girl shouted through ragged breath. She never thought she was a good ruler, and thought of herself as the tyrannical and foolish

type. So there was nothing that displeased her more than getting complimented for her actions. In contrast to the agitated monarch, Trisnai had a calm smile that was almost detestable. There was even a hint of warmth when he said:

「It can't be helped that Your Majesty is worried at this stage as you try to force compliances through fear. But this is just the beginning of your royal path, one day, you will get the masses to submit to you through means beyond terror. Which is why I'm not worried about your fate.」「It's so easy to be a madman, you just need to keep deluding yourself—」

The Empress restrained herself despite her anxiety. There was no point in this conversation since they were talking past each other— she convinced herself with that and finally returned to her responsibility as an Empress.

「...Back to the topic, you say we have reached the limit to the time we managed to buy… So we need to prepare for war?」

「Yes, Your Majesty, it's only a matter of time before the Kioka invades again.」

「I will strengthen the border defences.」

She ended the useless conversation and stated the conclusion. But Trisnai refused to budge.

「That's good, but not good enough— Does Your Majesty recall the basic strategy the Kioka will use against a foreign nation?」

Chamille stopped in her tracks. Unlike the previous drivel, she could sense the intent behind this question.

「—『The enemy of your enemy is your friend』, just like how they incite the Shinnack Tribe unrest.」

As if to praise her for the great answer, the fox calmly said the right answer with a brilliant smile.

「That’s right, we need to be wary of traitors. If Your Majesty surveys our nation, you will find a group with a position even more unstable than the Shinnack Tribe.」

ー Understanding what he was trying to say, the Empress bit her thumbnail and lowered her gaze.

「...Church of Aldera, huh?」



「—Organizations affiliated with the Church of Aldera that is trying to sow discord in the Empire will be making a big move.」

This was the centre of the Kioka Republic Capital Norandot. In the middle of the orderly streets was the Parliament House erect from pure white marble. The Insomniac Brilliant General and his two trusted aides had been summoned to the Prime Minister’s office once again.

「Ever since the Ra-Saia-Alderamin Holy Army traversed the mountains to invade the Empire, it should be clear that the devout followers of the Church of Aldera will feel uneasy. This was only natural since their religion had clashes with their country. The clergy are the most affected. Devout followers would be caught between their religious teachings and the reality of the situation and feel uneasiness about separating from the country where their citizenship is recognized. There is a good chance we can use this to make them take action.」

The Prime Minister fidgeted with the puzzle rings in his hand as he laid out the foundation of his strategy. Today, it was three twisted metal wires, which gave the impression that it was more difficult than usual.

「There are several goals we want to achieve. To disrupt the national sentiment in the Empire to weaken their war potential —

Well, this part is the same as our strategy of inciting civil wars. Before the time for the decisive battle, we will keep using this method.」

Although we missed a crucial chance in the past. Ario joked with a relaxed tone. On the surface, Jean only took it as a joke, but he was burning with rage inside.

「But this time, there will be another objective. When the enemy camp is in disarray, we will use this chance to rescue the 『Great Mother of White Wings』 Elulufay Tenerexilla.」

When they heard the name of their good friend who got taken prisoner, their expressions turned serious. Morale would be higher during a mission to rescue allies. Ario smiled, this was the reflex burned into the body of soldiers and that included the three of them.

「As you know, I'm very invested in talents that I uncovered myself. She is the same as you, an irreplaceable talent of Kioka, It's about time for her to end her vacation and return to us.」

「Yah*. Without her, the new 4th Fleet will be drastically weaker.
」

「That's one aspect, at the same time, she has political significance. Kioka isn't completely united yet, she's a bit too liberal, but there's no one else who can show unconditional love than her. Considering the borders after the war, I want people like her to hold a high position in the military right now.」

Soldiers who performed splendidly in war would retain their influence after they retired from the front lines. Ario was planning for the future with this in mind, which made Harrah cross his arm in awe.

「Prime Minister Sir, you are so far sighted, and is already considering the situation after the war?」

「If possible, I want to keep considering things after the war. I love peace and often sigh in my heart that I'm born in an era of war.

」 The Prime Minister made a show of sighing. He didn't miss Miara moving her brows slightly.

「... That sounds so fake～ That's what your face is telling me, Miara.」

「Huh?— I-I'm not thinking about that!」

Miara denied that in a panic. Knowing very well what she was thinking, Jean said with a wry smile.

「That's right, Sir. Even if that's what she thinks, her choice of words won't be so uncouth. 『It's difficult to determine what the Prime Minister is really thinking, but his action definitely won't match his words』... That's what she will say if she's unhappy.」

「Jean too...! Don't tease me!」

Miara who was the target of their teasing averted her face angrily. Ario shrugged.

「Not being literal with our words is the pitiful fate of politicians. Sigh, leaving that aside— like that time with the Shinnack Tribe, we will need people to guide them in the Empire. The Remeon faction had weeded out many of our spies, so the mission difficulty will be higher than last time. As a member of the Phantom, what are your views on this, Miara?」

He asked for her opinion with serious eyes, which made her stand up straight and answer.

「...The enemy has strengthened their security and our interference has been weakened. If we want to win under such conditions, we will need to wake the 『Dreamer』.」

Miara suggested with the code word of the Phantoms. After considering that, Ario raised the corners of his lips.

「Indeed, it's a good idea to use our trump card. So, we are going to pick her?」

「Yes, if it's her, it will work.」 Miara promised confidently. Jean also nodded in agreement.



「—Major, sorry for intruding so early in the morning, there's a letter for you!」

She was brushing her teeth after tidying her clothes when knocking came from the door. She quickly rinsed her mouth and walked briskly to open the door.

「A letter? Thank you, sorry for troubling you to send it to my room.」

Haro chatted warmly to the courier she was acquainted with, and he returned the kind smile.

「Don't worry, this is a privilege accorded to all field-grade officers, and Major Becker fits the bill. Please don't hesitate to call us for anything.」

「Haha, I'm still not used to it.」

Bidding him farewell after a brief chat at the entrance, Haro took the few letters she received and turned back. As she walked back to her room, she checked the sender and contents of each letter.

「The duty roster for next month and my salary slip… Oh, a letter from Aunt Hanna. How nostalgic～ Is everyone in the Yunakura province doing well～?」

As Haro opened and checked each letter, she suddenly stopped.

「... From my hometown?」

Sent by the Becker family. Haro opened the envelope marked as such and read the letter inside.

「......」

At a glance, it was a normal letter from a father to his daughter. Aside from telling her about how the family was doing, he was worried about her and gave her strong encouragement.

「... Hah!... Hah!...」

Haro’s breathing became ragged as she read that unassuming passage. The codes cleverly weaved between the lines sent subliminal messages beyond the consciousness level.

「...Hah!...Hah!...Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah—!」

Soon, her entire body started to shake, and a voice echoed directly in her skull.

—「It’s time to wake up, Patrenshina」.

「Hah————!」

Her lungs contracted to the limit. When her breathing went over the limit, her consciousness turned white and snapped.

「—Excuse me, Major, you have another letter! It got mixed with the other mail, so I left it out by mistake!」

The mailroom soldier who realized his mistake returned to the room to find Haro standing in her room with her usual calm smile. 「—Okay, thank you.」

「No, I just said you can call me for anything, and I made a mistake right after that, sorry— Hmm? Is that… a letter from home?」 He proffered the envelope he missed out and said with a glance at the letter in her hand. It looked crumpled from being grasped too hard, so it looked a little weird.

「— That’s right. My younger brother sends me letters often, not too much from my parents though. It has been a while since I last got their letter.」

「Is that so? I’m envious that you have a good brother. I have a younger sister back at home too, but she hates to write. She didn’t even send me a new year’s greeting in recent years.」

The soldier said with a smile, and haro giggled with a hand on her mouth.

「Fufu— but my family is really strict, the letter this time said harshly: 『You must be sleeping instead of working, so wake up and get to work!』」

「That's tough. The Major is very hardworking to me though… —Oh, I started blabbering without realizing it ー I will take my leave, please take your time with your letter.」

The soldier kindly ended the conversation and left. Sigh～～ Haro watched him leave blankly and sighed melancholically.

「— Really… It will be great if I can keep on sleeping～」

Her tone changed slightly and her face and movement looked childish.

「Good night, Haroma Becker. And in your place, Good Morning, Patrenshina. Oh, I remembered— That's right, I'm the worst kind of people, I can't keep staying here.」

Hmm～ Haro walked briskly to the window and basked in the sunlight. She stretched her back like a cat as she moaned.

「— Did you have fun? Were you sad? Have you laughed and cried with your friends? But, that's over now. Dream time is over.」

As if she was mumbling to someone beside her, Haro kept mumbling to herself in the bright room.

「After I wake up, everything, be it good or bad, will be destroyed by me. This is 『our』 fate, remember? Here— time to go. The weather is really great!」

Her voice was innocent, eyes were pure, smile incredibly hollow, she looked completely different. The air about the girl, who used to be Haroma Becker, wasn't something a living person would have.

「Let's start our wonderful work, and get to the task on hand—」

Her steps were as light as the cloud and she hummed a song more cheerful than the birds.

The most wicked Phantom had awoken from her slumber and was unleashed onto the world this morning without anyone realizing.

